

Norm Cates'

# CLUB INSIDER

CELEBRATING 29 YEARS OF TRUST

## Ben Marciano's Zone Health and Fitness *Fulfillment Through Serving Others*



Top (L - R) Albert Shaw, Tracie Bracey and Ben Marciano. Bottom (L - R) Tiana Acosta, James Roig and Paige White

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# CLUB INSIDER

CELEBRATING 29 YEARS OF TRUST

## Ben Marciano's Zone Health and Fitness *Fulfillment Through Serving Others*

By: Justin Cates

When most think of success, they do so in terms of dollars and cents. Simple as that. The more money you have and make, the more successful you are. But, I offer that there are other, more fulfilling ways to think of success. Dollars and cents cannot fill the hole inside one's soul. If you feel incomplete, money will not fix it. Instead, maybe a more defined purpose, one's "Why," can. When you define purpose, you can attain it, and with that, one becomes complete.

This month's *Club Insider Cover Story* is about **Ben Marciano**, Owner of *Zone Health and Fitness*, and he is one who has lived on both sides in terms of the definition of success. He has achieved the traditional definition of success: Money and plenty of it. With that, from the outside looking in, he was deemed a success, but as he will explain, it didn't feel like it. Personally, he was not fulfilled.

In 2018, through some brave and tough comments from those around Ben, he changed. Success was no longer determined in the traditional sense. Instead, it was driven by something more metaphysical: *Serving Others*. For Ben, and certainly those around him, it changed everything.

Though in our typical format, this cover story is atypical in terms of its content. There will be a few traditional nuts and bolts, but this story is more about philosophy. And, importantly, the events that led to and brought that philosophy to light for Ben. As we enter the second half of 2022, we share this particular story this month so that it

may rejuvenate your Mission if it is to *Serve Others*. Or, maybe revisit your Mission and your "Why" altogether.

So, get ready folks, this a long one. But, it is a fulfilling one. Enjoy the story of **Ben Marciano** and *Zone Health and Fitness*.

### An Interview With Ben Marciano, Owner of Zone Health and Fitness

**Club Insider (C.I.)** - Where were you born and where did you grow up?

**Ben Marciano (BM)** - I was born in Queens, New York. Then, at the age of two, my parents divorced, and I moved to Dunnellon, Florida. At that time, there wasn't much of a city and really nothing to do to keep busy and out of trouble. So, I grew up in Dunnellon, graduated high school, then went to a local community college called *CF*. From there, I went to *Florida State University (FSU)*, after which I moved around several times. I traveled along the East Coast working in the industry in one way or another, back to New York, then Miami before coming back to Ocala, Florida around 2004.

**C.I.** - Were you involved with any competitive sports over the years?

**BM** - My grandparents raised me during

my school years, but in all honesty, I was left to my own devices. I got involved in basketball during my 8th grade year. Once I started playing, I really enjoyed it. I went out for the team in my 9th grade year, and I got cut. The coach said, 'You can do one of two things. You can go home and stop playing or you can go home, practice, get better and come back.'

I went home, and I practiced three to four hours a day. I went back my sophomore year, and I made the team and even became a starter. What that showed me was that, if you want something badly enough, you must work hard to get it. When I look back, I think that was such a good lesson in my life and taught me an incredible work ethic.

**C.I.** - That is exactly why I always ask the sports question. Inevitably, 95% of the businesspeople I interview played a sport. It's such a developmental thing that's so important to discipline, setting goals and going after them. Sports is the greatest metaphor for life and business.

**BM** - Absolutely. I was not great at school, but being an athlete taught me some good things like goal setting, work ethic and resilience. I really feel like I learned so much from it.



Ben Marciano

**C.I.** - Please tell us about your wife, **Danielle**. Where's she from? How did you meet?

**BM** - Danielle was born in Chicago, but she and her family moved to Ocala when she was two so her dad could start his medical practice near family. She's pretty much been here her whole life. We met while she was finishing up her degrees at the *University of Central Florida (UCF)* and *Seminole State College*.

In 2005, I was a trainer at a *Lord's Gym* in Ocala. Danielle came in with her mom for a one week pass to train for the *Miss Florida Pageant*. I signed her up for a membership, and I offered her a free personal training session. I'll tell you, from the second I saw her, I could tell she was going to be my wife. It was unbelievable. When I called my dad to tell him he said,  
(See *Ben Marciano Page 8*)



## Inside the Insider: Edition #343

- Finding Group Fitness Pros to Facilitate Growth - **By:** Sara Kooperman, JD
- Equipment Financing - **By:** Paul Bosley
- Five Keys to Opening a New Facility - **By:** Chris Stevenson
- Are You Ready for the Bubble to Burst? - **By:** Thomas Plummer
- The Rocky Road that Got Us Here - **By:** Jeffrey Pinkerton
- Crunch Fitness Celebrates Two Million Member Mark
- HealthyCARE® - Your Pathway to Future Growth
- REX Roundtables Announces Partnership with ITR Economics
- And, of Course, *Norm's Notes*

## Norm's Notes

■Hello Everybody! This is your Club Insider Founder and Tribal Leader Since 1993 checking in with our 343rd monthly edition of this "Labor of Love" we call Club Insider! Summer is rolling along, and we hope you and your family are having a GREAT ONE!

■Is America a GREAT country, or what? Folks, at the ripe old age of 76, every day of my life, before I go to sleep and then when I awaken, I thank GOD for several things:

1. Being ALIVE! After being a *bonafide GEEZER* for a good while now, that's really a BIG ONE.

2. I say Thanks to the good Lord for the vision I still have in my left eye, because it's with my left eye that I'm still able to continue to write these Norm's Notes to y'all, as well as edit every new edition before it goes to press. Although I'm essentially blind in my right eye and really don't have use of it at all anymore, my left eye's doing great, so I THANK GOD often for the vision I still have!

3. I thank the good Lord for ILENA, my lovely bride of 41 years. And, I thank God

for our amazing son, JUSTIN CATES, my partner in Club Insider, and since April of 2020, our highly esteemed Club Insider Publisher.

So, folks, please know this... I'm very determined to keep on pounding this keyboard to produce these Norm's Notes for you all until I go to the "Happy Hunting Ground!" My GOAL is for my departure from this beautiful Earth to be DECADES from now!!! That's my story, and I'm sticking to it! YAHOO!

■Even though I'm writing this on the Friday before FATHER'S DAY, following this Note is a really good one about FIT4MOM. By the way, a belated Happy FATHER'S DAY to all of you DADs out there! Just in case you don't know this already, being a Dad is one of the greatest blessings that God has given us mortal humans! I AM VERY BLESSED, FORTUNATE and EXTREMELY PROUD to be JUSTIN CATES' Dad! Now, let me move on to the next, also very important Norm's Note.

■I want to share information with you about a national community and resource group called FIT4MOM. Recently, on Facebook, Founder LISA DRUXMAN posted: MOM'S

WITH A MISSION: Milk Mission 2022. Lisa created it in response to the hardships that parents from their 275+ FIT4MOM franchise locations across the nation have been experiencing for the past year due to the baby formula shortage. If you want to learn more about helping, call (866) 348-4666 and ask for Lisa. If you don't hear back from Lisa, call LANETTE GARDNER, Director of Marketing and Communications, at (619) 890-2883 or reach her via email at lanette@fit4momhq.com. I sure hope you will be able to help Lisa and her FIT4MOM Team!

■The 2022 IHRSA Convention and Trade Show, held in Miami, June 22 - 24, was in my view, definitely a success. But, before getting into commentary on the WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY and HOW of IHRSA MIAMI, I want to go back in time and remember the names of some of our IHRSA Friends who have departed. REMEMBERING: BROTHER CURT BEUSMAN and his loving wife JANE, DR. GERRY FAUST, STEVE THARRETT, CHUCK LEVE, GEOFF HAMPTON and MIKE CHAET. May they all REST IN PEACE. And, folks, I know I've missed mentioning some folks we've lost. So, I welcome those omissions at Norm@clubinsideronline.com. I'll update the aforementioned list next month. Thanks in advance for your kind help!

■As it always is, it was GREAT seeing my long-time friend, RICK CARO! As my son and I call him, I mention "Uncle Rick" first were it not for him, IHRSA would not exist. And, for that matter, neither would Club Insider. Instead, today, I'd be a retired



Norm Cates

airline pilot! I believe in giving credit where it is due, so I give Rick the credit for IHRSA being his idea way back in 1981. So, Thank You Rick Caro! And, while I am at it, thank you to my first business partners, RICH BOGGS, the late RAY IRWIN and the late FRED STRECK, because without all of those listed here, I would not have been and stayed involved in this wonderful industry! For that, I am forever thankful.

■It was also great seeing GARY YURICH, my long-time friend and a previous long-time Club Insider Advertiser, with his company called Best Lights. At our Booth, Gary explained to me WHY he had to drop out of advertising a few years ago after being with us over ten years. Folks, this is a DOOZIE of a story, and I'm going to hit it short and sweet because Gary has promised to write an article chronicling (See Norm's Notes Page 6)

### About Club Insider

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**PRINTING and MAILING SERVICES** - Walton Press

Club Insider  
P.O. Box 137314  
Clermont, FL 34713-7314  
www.clubinsideronline.com

Proudly Published in The United States of America



### Thanks and Appreciation

At Club Insider, we are excited to be in our 29th Year of this home-based health and fitness club trade publication! The thought that this publication was founded to serve an industry I truly love, and so that I could become a Mister Mom for my son, Justin, is still intriguing and amazing to us. So, I wish to extend my most sincere Thanks and Appreciation to everyone who has made this amazing 29-year run possible.

A very sincere Thanks and Appreciation go to Rick Caro, the late Dr. Gerry Faust and the Faust Executive Roundtable #1 for helping me decide in 1993 what my home-based business would be. Thanks and Appreciation to my long-time friends, Ron Hudspeth and Cathy Miller, formerly of Atlanta's Hudspeth Report for the tremendous assistance they provided. Thanks and Appreciation to all of the folks at Walton Press in Monroe, Georgia. They've done an absolutely excellent job for us all these years and have printed every one of our monthly editions! And, of course, Thanks and Appreciation to the United States Postal Service for sending those editions to our readers! Thanks and Appreciation to all of our READERS. Sincere Thanks and Appreciation to our Club Insider Advertisers, past and present, for their kind and dedicated support of this publication. Thanks and Appreciation to all of our Club Insider Contributing Authors, past and present. Thanks and Appreciation to IHRSA for all it does for all of us. And, sincere Thanks and Appreciation to my son, Justin, who has become our Publisher and is a truly great partner. You name it and Justin does it each and every month!

Last, but surely not least, this writer who refused to fear failure when many told him he didn't have a chance of surviving the publishing business for even a year did survive. And, he would like to give his sincere Thanks and Appreciation to the power that made that survival happen: God.

Very sincerely, with love in my heart for you all,

Norm Cates, Jr.

# Fitness CRM of the year



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**...Norm's Notes**

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what he went through when a trusted nine-year employee of his literally stole the business while working for Gary.

We are going to publish this article as a *SERVICE* to all of you in the industry who have employees you rely on. All names will be kept secret to protect the innocent and to avoid any potential law suits, but Gary is going to **TELL - IT - LIKE - IT - WAS** with this crooked nine-year employee! *Give 'EM HELL... GARY!*

■ Friends and club business veterans, **FRED ELIAS** and **WARREN WEBB**, have recently joined **HAPANA**, the end-to-end platform for ambitious fitness businesses. They were in **Booth #1256** next door to our Booth.

■ Folks, it was **TRULY A PLEASURE SEEING** the following long-time friends: **SANDY** and **RAY GORDON** and **DOUG MILLER** (my "Best Man" at the chapel wedding of my wife **ILENA** and me in Las Vegas in 1982).

■ **THANKS** and sincere **APPRECIATION** to **PETE MOORE**, **DAVID GANULIN** and their terrific **Integrity Square Team** for the fantastic job they did producing their terrific **HALO Event** at **IHRSA Miami**. It was post-show on Thursday, and they hosted a marvelous reception, providing delicious complimentary food and drink for several hundred folks. These guys deserve **serious KUDOS** for their efforts. **SO, JUSTIN**, my wife, **ILENA**, and I say: **Thank You to Pete Moore and David Ganulin of The Integrity Square Team!**

■ **Thank you also to RON LAMB** and **DARON ALLEN** for the invite to the **Club Automation event**. This was held in conjunction with **Augie's Quest**, and their goal was to raise **\$100,000**. **LYNNE NIETO** provided an update on **AUGIE**, as well as everything **ALS TDI** is doing to stop this horrible disease!

■ The following is a list more folks we were thrilled to also see at **IHRSA Miami**. IF I did see you, and I've accidentally left your name off this Norm's Notes writing, then **I want to sincerely beg your pardon**, and at the same time, I ask you to please forgive this **GEEZER** who's pounding this keyboard one day after **IHRSA 2022** was over! So, here goes. It sure was great seeing: **IHRSA's CEO, LIZ CLARK** and the terrific **IHRSA TEAM; DARON "ROCKETMAN" ALLEN, VFPnext; LYNNE NIETO, Augie's Quest; GEOFF DYER, CR Fitness; EDDIE TOCK, REX Roundtables; WARREN WEBB** and **FRED ELIAS, Hapana; SARA KOOPERMAN, JD, SCW; Workout Anytime's STEVE STRICKLAND, JOHN QUATTROCCHI, JOHN CARSILLO** and **TARA MOORE; SAM LANASA, Swift Financial Services; JENNIFER URMSTON, Player's Health; BEN and DANIELLE MARCIANO, Zone Health and Fitness; MARTY McCALLEN, PAMELA KUFAHL** and **CRYSTAL ROMBERGER, Club Industry; GEORGE JACKSON, TG The Gym; REN RICE, Paramount Acceptance, and MICHAEL ROJAS and DONNA LINS, Iron Grip Barbell Company; as well as MIKE ALPERT, MIKE BENTON, ANDY TIM, STEPHANIE SAVAS, BRENT DARDEN, BILL McBRIDE, RUDY FABIANO, MIKE MANNING, STEPHANIE SUDDARTH, KEN REINIG, JIM WORTHINGTON,**

**BEN JACKSON, KEVIN STEELE, Ph.D., DAN FOSTER, DONALDO VISANI, VERONIKA LANCASTER, RON LAMB, ALISTER COLLINS, MAUREEN "MO" HAGAN, CAMIE EVANS, BRUCE and JOHANNA CARTER, ED CONNORS, TATUM CREWS, AL NOSHIRVANI, JEAN-PHILPPE PEREZ, LARRY CONNER, BEN DANIEL, BRANT BROOKS, ANTHONY PETERSON, JAY SHOATES, LUKE ABLONDI, STEPHANIE TUCKER, SUSAN MILLER, WANDA JOHNSON, DANIEL LYNCH, LAURA SWEARINGEN** and **DAN FOSTER**.

Folks, I can't wait to see you all again, this time in **SAN DIEGO, for IHRSA 2023! Save the Date for March 20-22, 2023!**

■ **CONGRATULATIONS** to **LAURY HAMMEL**, who's celebrating the **50th Anniversary of The Longfellow Clubs! Way to go, Laury!**

■ **Happy 88th Birthday to my long-time friend, MR. BILL HUBNER**, clearly a man whose name should be on the list of the richest individuals in the health club industry worldwide! Bill has been in our industry 70 years, and even after having all that fame and fortune, Bill is still one of the **NICEST** human beings you will ever met!

■ **TRX has filed for Bankruptcy!** One of the global leaders in functional training products and world-class training content, TRX announced it has initiated a process to identify a new strategic partner to support the company in executing its future growth strategy. **To facilitate the sale, TRX has voluntarily filed for Chapter 11 protection in the U.S. Bankruptcy Court**

for the **Central District of California, Santa Ana Division**. The company will continue to operate in the ordinary course of business, fulfilling its commitments to employees, customers, vendors and other partners.

■ **CONGRATULATIONS** to **SARA KOOPERMAN, JD, Club Insider Contributing Author** and *prominent club business educator* via her company, **SCW**, because Sara recently received a very nice honor. Here's the scoop from **JULIE KING**: "Congratulations to inspirational leader, Sara Kooperman, whose tireless efforts throughout the pandemic benefitted fitness professionals around the world with valuable education and motivation during such an unprecedented period. For her outstanding commitment and exceptional innovation using technology to serve the fitness industry, Sara recently earned the **2021 Most Innovating Fitness Pro Award from the Fitness Industry Technology Council (FIT-C)**." Be sure to check out the excellent **Article** by Sara in this edition on **Page #16**.

■ As the post-pandemic momentum continues to build in our great industry, I came across what I think is timely commentary in an article written by **CHRIS STEVENSON**, entitled: **Five Keys to Successfully Opening a New Facility**. Check out **Chris' Article** on **Page #19**. *Thank you to Athletic Business for the authorization to reprint this article.*

■ **24 Hour Fitness** has named **KARL SANFT** as *President and CEO* after a five-month search. Karl has been acting as *(See Norm's Notes Page 7)*

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## ...Norm's Notes

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interim CEO since **TONY UEBER**, former CEO, left the company in December of 2021. **Best of luck to Karl and 24 Hour Fitness as they press on.**

■ **ABC Fitness Solutions**, one of the club industry's leading providers of technology and related services, has announced that it's entered into a new technology partnership with **Golds Gym DC Metro (GGDC)**, part of the iconic Gold's Gym brand. GGDC, which becomes the most recent ABC Fitness Solutions partner to deploy **ABC IGNITE**, a next-generation club management solution set to streamline and scale multiple aspects of GGDC's 21 locations throughout northern Virginia. GGDC is making this strategic move to streamline and scale multiple aspects of its operations and lower its overall cost of ownership. GGDC's continued growth saw it open two new locations in 2021 despite the pandemic, and it has several new locations scheduled to open in 2022, including a new flagship location in Dupont Circle.

■ **9Round**, the world's largest kickboxing chain, announced the winners of the brand's most prestigious awards during its **2022 World Convention**, held in Orlando, Florida. **CONGRATULATIONS** to the winners of the following 2021 awards:

■ **CEO Award Winners** in the U.S. and Canada: **Miranda and Mauricio Acevedo - Culver City, CA; Pam and Randy Bundalian - Tustin, CA; and Judy and Paul Dredge - Fort McMurray, Alabama.**

■ **2021 International CEO Award:** **Raul Arturo Beer Vielmann, Pilarin Esther Beer Vielmann and Ariel Cabrera Fischer - Guatemala.**

■ And, it was announced that "**Krazy K**" was honored with the **2021 9Round Trainer of the Year Award.**

**SHANNON HUDSON**, *9Round Founder and CEO*, commented: "It was absolutely exhilarating to be back in person with franchise owners, managers and trainers from all over 9Round Nation. The energy and positivity in the room was next level as we shared a killer group workout, best practices, brand enhancements, and most importantly, celebrated the accomplishments of our franchisees. This year's winners elevate our brand to a new standard. We're proud to honor their accomplishments in the last year and excited to kick-start our growth for the future."

■ **Core Health & Fitness LLC**, of Vancouver, Washington, has acquired **Jacobs Ladder**, according to an announcement from Core Health. Financial terms of the transaction were not released. This is the second acquisition for Core Health in 2022. It acquired **Wexer** in April.

■ **Congratulations to BILLIE JEAN KING** as *French President*, **EMMANUEL MACRON**, recently bestowed France's highest order of merit on the pioneering U.S. tennis great as she celebrated the **50th anniversary of her French Open victory**. Macron commented: "In 50 years, you have revolutionized international sport, but also equality between women and men and the rights of minorities worldwide. Your history is an American dream, one of these destinies that are almost too good to be true."

■ As a long-time fan of professional golf, I thought some of you who're also pro golf fans would like to know what follows, if you don't already. The news is that the one and only, legendary **JACK NICKLAS**, the top pro golfer of all time in terms of total Major PGA Tournaments won at 18, has received a very rare and special honor (Yes, Jack has more Major Tournament wins than the late **ARNOLD PALMER** and **TIGER WOODS!**). Jack Nicklas has been honored by **The University of St. Andrews** by being named an "**Honorary Citizen**" of **St. Andrews**, joining only two other legendary figures in history, the one and only, **BOBBY JONES**, in 1958, and of all people, the one and only, **BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**, in 1759! **WOW!** Talk about **RARE HONORS!** This one truly takes the cake and puts **JACK NICKLAS**, who the first weekend in June assisted the announcers in TV Coverage of the *Colonial Golf Tournament* in Ohio on even more legendary turf! The honor was conferred on Jack by **The Royal Burgh of St. Andrews Community Council**, the equivalent of "**The Freedom of the City**" given to Bobby Jones. Nicklas retired from competitive golf in 2005 with his final appearance at St. Andrews, **his 165th major tournament**. As I previously mentioned, Jack won a record of 18 major tournaments, including **three wins at St. Andrews, golf's oldest championship**. Nicklas said he left St. Andrews with great memories and had no plans to return, but then, "They wrote and asked me if I would accept being named an 'Honorary Citizen of St. Andrews,'" said Nicklas at the Memorial he hosted in Ohio the first weekend in June. "I couldn't turn that down. There's no way in the world I can turn that down, not with Bobby Jones and Benjamin Franklin the only other Americans to have done it. So, I'm going back!" The ceremony will be on July 12th.

■ Except for my standard closing comments, this is my last **Norm's Note** for this month. But, this is a really good thing for all of you to read. **NETFLIX** the movie name: **BETHANY HAMILTON "UNSTOPPABLE,"** and you'll see her story. This movie is definitely worth viewing because **young Bethany's amazing story is about how she continued on in the competitive world of surfing after she had one of her arms bitten off at the shoulder by a giant 14-foot tiger shark!** This story gives amazing a whole new meaning!

To whet your appetite for one of

the most amazing stories in the history of the sports world, check out what **GOOGLE** said about Bethany's truly amazing story: "Known most notably as one of the biggest comeback stories of our era, Bethany Hamilton has become synonymous with inspiration. Her story of *determination, faith and hope* has resounded in encouragement worldwide. At the age of 13, as a rising surf star, Bethany lost her left arm to that 14 foot-long monster shark, a happening which seemed to end her dream surfing career. However, one month after that horrific attack in which the shark took her arm off at the shoulder, Bethany returned to surfing! And, within two years, she won her first national surfing title! Bethany's foundation of faith has been her backbone, her source of truth, hope and strength. At 17 years old, she realized her dream of surfing professionally, and she is still an active professional surfing competitor to this day. Bethany has been able to touch a large number of people with her faith message, charitable efforts and overall spirit. Her greatest joy is being a wife and mother, and she continues to touch and inspire lives globally as a professional surfer, author and motivational speaker. She currently has her own blog and online course on helping others become unstoppable."

Check it out folks, **I promise you'll be glad you did!**

■ **JUSTIN** and I want to say **Thanks for reading Club Insider!**

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■ **God bless our troops, airmen and sailors worldwide and keep them safe. Thank you, Congratulations and Welcome Home to all of our troops who have served around the world. God bless America's Policemen and women and Firemen and women; keep them safe. Finally, God bless you, your family, your club(s) and your members. God Bless America! Laus Deo!**

(*Norm Cates, Jr. is a 48-year veteran of the health, racquet and sportsclub industry. He is the Founder and Tribal Leader Since 1993 of Club Insider, now in its 29th year of monthly publication. In 1981, he was IHRSA's First President, and a Co-Founder of the Association with Rick Caro and five others. In 2001, he was honored by IHRSA with its DALE DIBBLE Distinguished Service Award, one of its highest honors. And, in 2017, he was honored with Club Industry's Lifetime Achievement Award. He can be reached by phone at 770-635-7578 or email at Norm@clubinsideronline.com.*)

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## ...Ben Marciano

continued from page 3

'There's no way; this is crazy.' I just felt it; I don't know how to explain it.

**C.I.** - That is awesome. I love a story like that! What are the names and ages of your children? I bet they have been involved in sports!

**BM** - We are so proud of our children and adore time with them. Our oldest is **Benjamin, Jr.**, 13, plays guitar and loves basketball. He is a fun kid to be with. Our second son, **Vincent**, 10, loves flag football and basketball. He is so kind-hearted and driven. We also have a daughter, **Giavanna**, 8, who is on a gymnastics team. She is spunky and fearless.

### Entering the Health and Fitness Club Industry

**C.I.** - When and how did you get involved in the health and fitness club industry?

**BM** - When I graduated high school, I was very underweight and totally insecure. When I got out of high school, I wanted to put on some weight, so I started training with my buddy who owned a World Gym in Ocala.

Once I graduated from CF and went to FSU, there was a *Gold's Gym* near the college. I applied for a job there, but they were struggling. After they had offered me the job, they recanted, stating they were going to have to close the doors. Later, they called me back and hired a consulting agency called *American Club Systems (ACS)* to fix the gym and offered me an opportunity to work with them. While I was there, I got to see them implement systems that ultimately saved the gym.

I moved up the ranks in the business really quickly. I became a *Sales Manager* within about six months. From there, I took what I learned and went on to manage some clubs. I went back to New

York to work for a while. I ran a World Gym there for a couple of years, then I simply traveled, fixing gyms.

I don't mind sharing this, but there was a point in my life when I got a little too involved in partying and hit a real low point in my life to the point where I was almost homeless. In 2005, I had to do a life reset. That's when I came back to Ocala, humbled myself, and instead of managing a gym, I actually said to the guy, 'I'll do some training, and I'll clean your gym, but I need to focus on rebuilding the foundation of who I am.' I had some good mentors in my life then. That's also when I met my wife, so things really started changing in a positive direction for me.

### The YMCA

**C.I.** - Thank you for sharing that. You're not alone. I believe most people, myself included, experience a true low point in one form or another, at one time or another. What defines someone is how they react to it, and it determines their life's trajectory from there. So, what happened next?

**BM** - At this point, I was at a Lord's Gym, as I mentioned earlier. One day, a lady walked in, I took her on a tour and tried to sell her a membership. She said, 'I'm actually not here to buy a membership from you; I want you to come work for me.' Intrigued, I asked where she worked. She proudly stated, 'The YMCA.'

I explained that I was not planning on staying in Ocala and appreciated the offer. Fast forward a few months, I happened to be driving by the Y and felt a pull to turn into the parking lot. I don't know if you have ever felt like you're supposed to go somewhere, but I just felt like I was supposed to be there that day. A real peace washed over me. When I walked in, the lady I mentioned before was standing at the front desk, and she said, 'What took you so long? We have been waiting for you.'

After sitting down with her, she



The Marciano Family - Ben and Danielle, Children: Vincent, Giavanna and Benjamin, Jr.

explained how much they wanted to have me at the Y but that they could only offer me \$10 an hour. They were losing a half a million dollars a year at that time and borrowed money from the *Orlando Association* just to stay open. She believed that, if I went there, I'd have opportunities to move up in the Association. I expressed my appreciation, but as a fully booked trainer at Lord's Gym, there was no way I could take that.

My future wife and I were dating at the time, and I shared this conversation with her. I explained to her that I felt like I was supposed to work there but wasn't sure because of the rate. She encouraged me to trust God's plan and take the leap of faith. She saw in me the same gifts and work ethic this Y employee saw. That concept had never crossed my mind; I always chose the money. So, I did it. Within about a year, after I implemented all the systems I had learned up to that point, that Y location doubled in membership.

The lady who recruited me was promoted but promised me that I would move up into her previous role as *Executive Director*. When the *Orlando Y Vice President* came to visit, I was 25 at the time and was told that they really liked me, but I was just too young for the job. He said I wasn't ready for the next step. Are you kidding!? I had worked so hard, put in tons of extra hours and turned this

place from a bleeding facility into a self-sustaining facility and was being denied a position I clearly earned and was promised. I had done everything they said and was underpaid. That same day, an insurance broker from a reputable company came in to scout me, offering me \$50,000 a year to come sell insurance because of my hard work and success in my sales position.

I told him I would talk it over with my girlfriend, but I was pretty sure I was going to take it. I mean \$10 an hour, no commissions compared to \$50,000 plus commissions. Danielle kindly asked, 'Really? You think you are called to sell insurance? Instead, why don't you show them you are the guy for the executive director job? Go back, face this and prove to them that you are the one for the position.'

And, that's exactly what I did. Over the next six months, I worked my tail off while they interviewed people right in front of me. They never could find anyone that loved the mission of serving as much as I, so in 2007, I became the youngest Executive Director for the Y and married my wife.

**C.I.** - Wow! Faith and Belief.

**BM** - I share that with my employees all the time because sometimes people think the best thing to do when faced with not getting what they believe they deserve is to leave, but they're missing an opportunity. I think that, if I had done that, the trajectory of everything would've changed. As I said, I became the Executive Director within about six months of wanting to quit.

**C.I.** - There's also the parallel back to not making the team in basketball your 9th grade year, then working hard, coming back and making it! It's that in real life.

**BM** - Yes, following through, work ethic and not throwing a tantrum when you don't get what you think you deserve. In 2012, our

(See *Ben Marciano Page 10*)



Zone Health and Fitness - Zone East, Ocala, Florida



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## ...Ben Marciano

continued from page 8

Y became one of the top Ys in the country. From one of the worst to one the best, and it was really bursting at the seams. The CEO explained we needed to do a capital campaign to expand the location. I said, 'Oh, that's great, it's something you do, right?' He said, 'I live in Orlando; you have all the relationships.' So, there I was in charge of raising \$3 million and then overseeing construction while keeping the facility running.

He added, 'We will hire a consultant, and he'll teach you how to do it. Just follow what he says.' So, the consultant came in and explained that the process would be super easy if I followed what he told me. We would identify 500 names of people who can give, and I would talk to each one... an average of seven times... If I did that, we would raise the \$3 million. Further, we would work with volunteers to get everyone involved. Well, we recruited some awesome volunteers, prospected and wound up raising \$5 million.

It was amazing! I couldn't believe it; it was such an incredible task, and we went above and beyond. Because of my success, they actually promoted me to Vice President. I had some locations in Orlando and was traveling a lot, pulling long hours and ultimately missing my wife, and by then, our two boys. One day, in the early part of 2014, I felt like I was stale and running on fumes. That weekend, while out at a restaurant, we ran into a very successful businessman named Tom Ingram. I overheard him tell the friend he was with that he would invest in anything I did... that I had the Midas touch. He turned to me and asked, 'Ben, you've done a great job with the Y, would you ever want to open your own gym?' I explained I didn't think it would look too good to have just raised \$5 million for the local YMCA then open a gym in the same town. 'Well, if anything ever

changes, you let me know,' he responded.

That night, I went home, and in a dream, I felt like God spoke to me and said, 'You're going to open a gym.' When I woke up the next day, I was so excited and shared it with Danielle. While raising all that money for the Y, I had been offered significant jobs where I would have made a lot of money. Danielle would always say, 'That's not who you are.' But, when I shared this with her, her reaction was different. She too felt a peace about this move.

### Zone Health and Fitness

**C.I.** - That is amazing! So, how did you go from that revelation to the development of *Zone Health and Fitness*?

**BM** - In 2011, the Feds closed the club where Zone now stands, which was once called *Compass Health and Fitness* and owned by a man named Lee Farkas, whose net worth was over a billion dollars. He opened a bunch of businesses in Ocala as well as other states but had conducted the largest mortgage scam of all time as seen on *American Greed*. A gentleman who was on my Board at the YMCA took over the facility for three years. He tried desperately to make it work, but it was spiraling out of control. When he first purchased the club, he asked me to come run it, and he would give me a portion of ownership, a boat and health insurance. As attractive as the offer was, we just didn't feel peace about it at the time.

By this time, Danielle and I took Tom Ingram's offer seriously and felt that I should call to see if the owner wanted to sell the club. I didn't waste time and called him that day. He asked me to meet with him. When I got there, he just stared at me. Then, all of a sudden, a tear rolled down his face. He said, 'Ben, my wife and I were on our knees last night, praying for an answer. We are shutting the club down in two days.'

It was a Wednesday, and they were shutting it down that Friday. He took



Zone Health and Fitness - Zone West, Ocala, Florida

my offer to purchase the facility and offered to help in any way he could. I secured investors, came in after hours to draw up plans, rearranged my personal finances and put operational plans in place. July of 2014, literally while we were having our daughter in the hospital, word got out to the local newspaper that we had opened the gym. Without ever closing the doors, we renovated, renamed it and trained all new staff. My wife and I had saved up money to live off of, knowing it would be a long time until there was income again, as the club was losing \$40,000 a month.

After nine months, we were running out of money. One day, while walking in the back office, I felt a sharp pain in my chest. I dropped to my knees thinking I was having a heart attack and was rushed to the hospital. Thankfully, it was just a panic attack. I remember going home, hitting my knees in prayer and crying, asking myself why did I do this? I had a wife and three kids. I had a great career with the Y. Now, I'm going to lose everything. This was the worst decision I've made in my life.

By the end of that month, though, Zone made money. I thought back to all the days I came in at 5AM, worked until 11PM just trying to make things work. It was a constant grind, and it finally started making money. On our pro forma, when I originally put this together, I figured the best-case scenario was that we'd get

to 3,000 members. We had 900 when I bought it, and it grew to 5,200 members. We became so busy that it was getting overcrowded. That's when we decided to open our second location in 2018.

**C.I.** - What an incredible story. Strength. Determination. Pain. Glory. I can feel your passion and the emotions involved. And, I know that makes things brighter and more beautiful every single day.

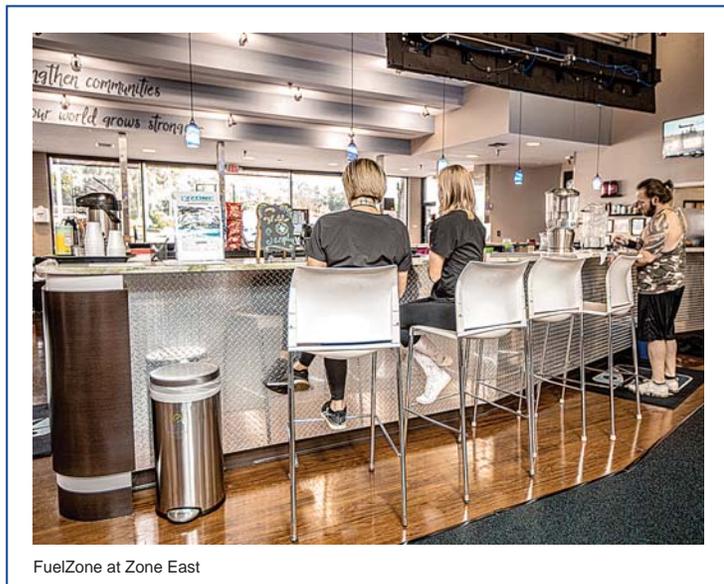
**BM** - It does. When we hire new staff, I do new employee orientations with them so I can give them an idea of where we came from... because all they see is this beautiful, successful club. I want them to understand the battles that were fought to make Zone Health and Fitness what it is today.

**C.I.** - I love it. Let's back track a little bit to the beginning because I know a lot has probably changed. So, take us through your original goals and concepts. What was shaken up, and what has held up to today?

**BM** - Danielle and I went back and forth on a name for the club. I explained the concept like this: 'I want to build different areas in the club so that, when people come in, it's not just cookie cutter, they will find an area that best fits their skills and abilities, like different zones.' She repeated, 'Zones.' And, we came up with *Zone Health and Fitness*. She looked to see if there was an LLC and website address, and it was available. For just a few bucks, we bought the domain and envisioned the look and feel of the facility. So, that's how the concept and name came about.

We had a dream with our original goal, and that was that we would love to franchise the concept and take it across the country. Of course, that was a great goal early on, not realizing what it takes to run a club like this, with the number of services and how tiring it can become. I think it's easier to franchise a club where you don't

(See Ben Marciano Page 12)



FuelZone at Zone East





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## ...Ben Marciano

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have as many services, because you don't have to rely on so many systems, processes or people. So, that original thought has changed now. We want to grow, but we're going to grow when our team is ready and when we feel like we have the resources to be successful. I don't want to do something just to do it; I want to do it and do it right.

We might do more clubs down the road, and who knows if it's going to be franchised. We just want to make sure that we're serving those whom we have now and are doing it really well. Then, if we have the resources, both financially and in terms of personnel, open more clubs. When we opened our second club in 2018, we didn't really have a second round of people to go there, so we divided our leadership team, which caused a downturn. It really affected us, so we learned from that. *You need to have extra people ready to go for that next club so you don't have a dip in service or revenue.*

**C.I.** - Please describe your facilities, including size, amenities, programs, services, etc. **BM** - Our main location, called *Zone East*, is over 30,000 square feet and is single level. We offer group exercise classes, cycling, CrossFit, as well as boxing, high intensity interval training (HIIT) classes, free weights, cable weights and a cardio zone. This club is set apart from our smaller club in that there is also a café, which serves both hot meals as well as protein shakes and lots of things in between. The goal here is to help our members with that major portion of health. We are focused on the recovery portion of fitness as well and provide a whirlpool, steam room, sauna, hydromassage bed, relaxing locker rooms, a stretching zone and tanning. We also offer childcare, which is divided into age groups.

Our second location, we call *Zone*

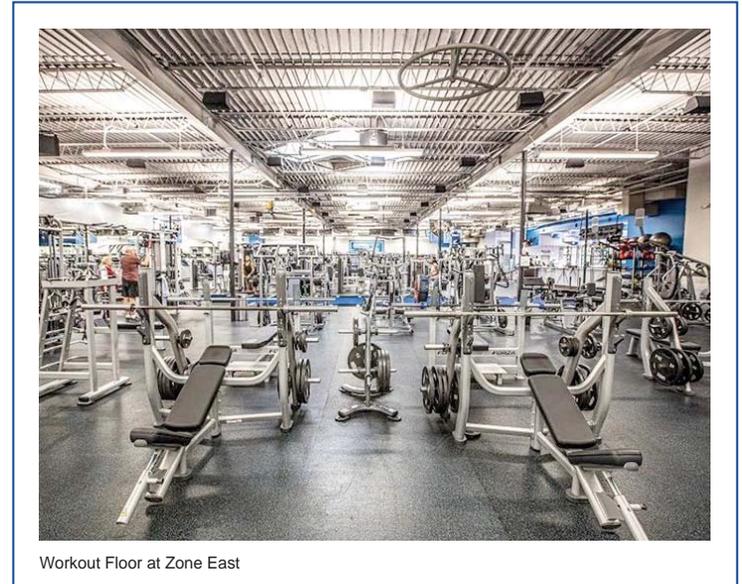
*West*, is 10,000 square feet and has a very different look and feel. This club is located on the second floor of a busy, outdoor shopping mall. The elevator and stairs take our members to the front door of this 24-hour club. Once inside, members find many of the same amenities. Childcare, group exercise classes and HIIT classes are offered, as well as cardio, free weights and cable weights. Beautiful three-piece bathrooms replace full size locker rooms, complimenting the boutique look and feel. I had to get really creative to fit all that we offer into a fraction of the space. While there isn't a café at this location, we do still serve coffee. Over 200 classes are coached each week in person and with virtual coaches broadcast to our members.

Meeting people where they are and helping them with their health is the goal. 'What gets measured gets done,' is a quote we sort of live by at *Zone*. What this means for us is that we put our members on a trajectory to accomplish goals. When a new member joins, we give them all the tools they need to be victorious. They are met by a coach who does a body scan to get a baseline and are then walked through the ins and outs of how to use the machines and given a plan based on their fitness goal and ability. Our members stay engaged, and we get excited when we celebrate the wins. I just love it when a member doesn't need a medication anymore because they are healthier.

### The Membership

**C.I.** - Please describe your three membership options, including pricing and offerings of each.

**BM** - When we first built it, our low-price membership was \$40, then \$50 for the mid-tier and \$120 for the top tier (all monthly pricing). We experienced a ton of success with that up until about 2018 when a *Planet Fitness* opened right between my two gyms and brought in its low-price points. We



Workout Floor at Zone East

weren't getting as many sales, because when someone sees \$10 a month versus \$40 a month, they don't even give the latter a chance.

So, one big change we made was to implement a low-price membership. It was scary for me because my thought was how many members would want to downgrade? Now, we utilize a bi-weekly payment plan of \$9.99 for our low-tier membership, then \$19.99 bi-weekly for mid-tier, and our top tier is \$59.99 bi-weekly.

**C.I.** - Excellent, so you were able to take the edge off the numbers a little bit with bi-weekly pricing. People see that and come through the doors more than before where they can then experience the difference. What's the tier percentage breakdown?

**BM** - Yes, that's it. We sell about 20% of our memberships on that lower tier, so it really is just the opportunity to get them in and move them onto the other plans as they want more in their membership and training. We average about 60% in our middle tier, and the other 20% is in our top tier.

**C.I.** - Please tell us about your typical members. How do you go about attracting them? How many do you have?

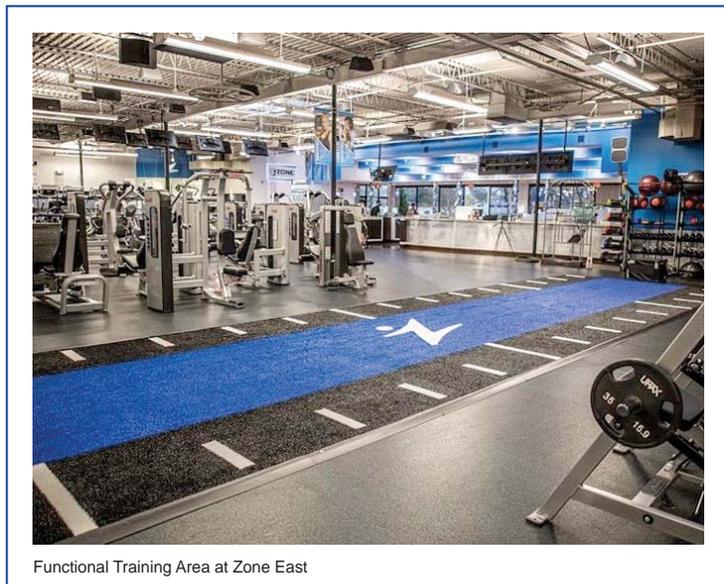
**BM** - We've returned to our pre-COVID numbers, so right now, between both clubs, we're at 6,300 members. We do a

lot of community outreach and participate in a ton of community events, so it's literally being seen as the giver we are that draws people in. We're also really big into digital marketing. We work with *Sneeze It* and have a full-time Marketing Director. Importantly, we use *Medallia* for customer experience management. We're one of the top clubs in their system and have won their *Five Nines Award* two years in a row. We get a ton of referrals from our members for treating them well, so they bring others into the club. So, those are the main ways that we attract people. And, of course, our employees are always creating and following up on leads.

As far as our member demographics, that's changed. The first crowd to come back was the younger crowd. Before COVID, we were 35 to 55 predominantly, but now we're 18 to 35. It has completely changed, and a younger crowd is coming into both of our clubs. I've asked friends across the country if they were seeing that, too. We are seeing that the demographic we used to have is taking longer to get back into the club. Because a lot of the 35 - 55s were taking group exercise classes, we have taken a big hit in that programming. So, like most every gym, one of the big things we added was a virtual program. While we are keeping the virtual training going, we have also done events trying to get our distanced members back into the club. It has certainly been a challenge for us, but now, we're starting to see them trickle in.

During COVID, in our social media platforms, we interviewed local physicians who had experience with the benefits of working out and how being physically fit helps against COVID. We tried to help build the awareness that not only does working out help prevent significant chronic illness, but it's also great in helping combat this thing that we were so scared of.

(See Ben Marciano Page 14)



Functional Training Area at Zone East



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## ...Ben Marciano

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**C.I.** - For lack of better words, from a business sense, what are some of the 'benefits' or 'opportunities' that did come out of COVID?

**BM** - Like many facilities, we were clean before, but now, we're super clean. One of the fun things that we do now is that I dress in our 'Z-Man' costume, put on a catchy song and then everyone on staff at that time participates in something we call a 'Clean Sweep,' where everyone cleans everything. This is done at both 10AM and 4PM now, whereas at the height of COVID, it was done with greater frequency. We announce it over the PA, put music on and make a really big deal out of it. We clean, and people talk about it to their friends outside of the club.

**C.I.** - Talk about making it fun; that's making it fun!

**BM** - Exactly. And, of course, throughout COVID, we've had to look at how to trim things down from an expense standpoint. When we were fat and happy, we really didn't look at our expenses, but since then, we were forced to get better. We've even cross-trained a lot of our staff, because we had to reduce payroll. It's just about being more efficient, and we were surprised to find all the expenses that we didn't even know about. But, I have to say, during the shutdown, we continued to pay our employees, kept on everyone who could stay, helped find jobs for those who could not and even helped others file for unemployment if that was necessary. My wife and I did not get paid, but we made sure the staff was taken care of.

### The Love for Community and Members

**C.I.** - On your website, your story and subsequent informational pages all discuss and reinforce community and love for your

members. During my tour with you, I got to experience it firsthand. Please tell us about this.

**BM** - There are two important things I have learned from the health club industry and the Y. In the health club industry, I learned sales, results, getting people in programs, etc. All important things. But, what the Y taught me was that there were real people on the other end of the memberships. People who had their own hardships and victories. So, when I created Zone: (1) I wanted to create a club that was really focused on helping people see great results, in which I think the health club industry does great. (2) I also wanted to build a club where, when you come in, you feel like you're part of a community, and together, we can make the community better.

Our **Mission** is to *strengthen people and to also strengthen our community*. I just have a heart for it, and we agreed that, when we built this, we were going to make it a gem that makes our community stronger. At the Y, every year, we were raising money for scholarships. At Zone, as a team, we came up with causes we wanted to support. My wife and I have very soft hearts for helping underprivileged children, so we do a lot with organizations that help children. We are involved with groups like the *Amette House, The Boys and Girls Club, Kimberly's Center* and pretty much anything that helps the children in our community. We are thankful to have helped so many over the years and proud to partner with such incredible organizations.

We are also very big supporters of law enforcement. And, we not only host a large number of benefits at our club, but we do a lot of events out in the community. Just this past Saturday, we went to a *Recovery Fest*, encouraging people battling addiction. There, we set up an information tent as well as sponsored the event. It's nice to spend time with people. I also serve on several different Boards in the community, which not only feels good to

give back, but our name then continues to be on the tip of people's mind. Any time we can get involved in an event or something in the community, we do it. With the help of the *Chief Greg Graham Committee*, our biggest event each year, the *Walkathon*, is hosted right here at Zone. The event is so successful that the facility gets so busy you can't even move. With that, we've raised over \$250,000.

Early on, it was a lot of my own ideas, but over the last couple of years, I've asked my team to help us come up with ideas so that they're bought into it. And, we are meeting needs Danielle and I may not have ever been made aware. Our team is like family. Throughout the years, we've raised money to help buy cars for some of our employees after we discovered they were walking to work, had small children or were so down on their luck. Some of them were our best employees. So, we've done fundraisers, like a car wash to raise \$3,000 or \$4,000, and through community connections, bought them a car and presented it to them in front of the members. We've done that three times. Not only are the recipients overjoyed, but the team that helped make it happen are forever changed. It's life-changing on both ends. One of the recipients has been with us since the beginning, and she talks about it to this day.

What we have found is that, if we can get our employees bought into something bigger than themselves, it shifts them to not only be a better person but to be a better employee. We're pretty strategic when we hire, too. We let potential employees know they are expected to serve in two community events a year. That's just who we are, and we hire individuals who are open to service.

### The Culture of Serving Others

**C.I.** - What do you consider your key market differentiators?

**BM** - Obviously, I love the concept of Zone,

but the biggest difference maker is our staff and how we hire the people we hire. When we do an interview, we're trying to find one thing: *Do they have the heart to serve?* We want skill, yes, but that comes behind heart. Do they want to serve? We're very strategic about that, and people tell us all the time that our staff has changed their lives.

Further, and I don't mind sharing this, but because of the second chance that I had in life, I try to do that for a lot of our staff. For some of our employees, Zone IS a second chance. They're rebuilding their life, and we get to watch them morph and grow. Our second chance staff are intensely passionate and inspired to work because they see that we believe in them. It's life altering.

**C.I.** - That's beautiful. Everyone deserves a second chance. As we discussed earlier, at one time or another, most will go through a rough time in their life and have to rebound. Staying along the same subject, across *Club Insider's Cover Stories*, common themes develop. This year, two key themes have been culture and passion. You have been described as having a great culture, and as all who are reading are experiencing, deep passion. Please tell us about that.

**BM** - In 2018, when the clubs were doing really well, I was very much driven by how successful I could become. And, if your mindset is on an undefined figment, nothing will ever be enough. I felt very unfulfilled, and it took someone very close to me to call me out on it and say, 'I know you care about people, but you're not showing people that you care about people.' That broke my heart.

When she told me that, I reached out to a guy I knew who does consulting and explained what was going on. He came in and did a session with the team and myself based on *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. He asked me to open the meeting, in which I apologized for how I had acted.

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Z-Man to the Rescue!



Money Raised and a Car Given to a Zone Staff Member

## ...Ben Marciano

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I'd been more focused on the results of the gym as opposed to being there for each of them, and I wanted to know how I could do better.

One by one, they all told me things that were tough to hear. My desire to honestly change was so strong that I shifted my focus to being more of a people-focused person. I put my focus every day toward just helping my staff become better people and helping them wherever they were. That's now how I define success. I realized that if I would take care of my team, they would take care of the customers. Following that shift, I feel a lot happier and a lot more fulfilled. My staff tells me how they love working here. In fact, we have had employees lead parents and parents lead adult children to employment at Zone because of how great they feel working here. Many businesses had problems during the pandemic trying to find people to work. We had people coming in every day asking to work at Zone because they could feel the energy when they came in to work out.

**C.I.** - Speaking of culture, please tell us about some of your key team members.

**BM** - I would love nothing more than to give a big shout out to ALL the team members who made Zone what it is today, but there are too many to name. Some are no longer employed with us, and some have been in the building since the first club stood here. I can tell you, though, if it wasn't for each gift that each and every one of them brought to the table, we wouldn't be the success we are now. I am forever grateful to each of them.

**C.I.** - Living next door in Orlando, I am honored to be conducting this interview on-site in *Ocala's Best Gym*, voted so

seven years in a row. Please tell us about these honors.

**BM** - *Ocala Magazine* puts this on, and it's a big deal for us... to be the *Best of the Best*. One of the goals when we opened Zone was to be the 'best gym in Ocala.' As we made changes to the club and culture, our members recognized the shift and began voting for us. We were also named *Ocala, Marion County's Business of the Year in 2015*, which was a huge accolade. And, as I mentioned before, we've also been recognized by *Medallia* as one of the top clubs in their system the last few years for overall service of our members. Every success for the club is a win for the team as a whole and national attention is a win for the entire community.

### Advice, Lessons and the Future

**C.I.** - Boiling down all of your experience of club ownership and management, as well as life, over the years, what key pieces of advice and lessons would you offer our readers?

**BM** - I think the biggest thing is that, if you honestly make your club, and ultimately your life, about serving and helping others become better, you will be fulfilled. There was a time I dreaded going to work every day, but now, I look forward to it because it's like a big family here. So, it's all about service. *If you put others first and you serve them, I think you'll find your way in whatever you're doing; success will follow.*

**C.I.** - Well said. Now, I think I know what your answer to this next question is going to be. What makes you most proud related to your clubs and business?

**BM** - It's my staff. We do a heads-up meeting on Saturday mornings at 10:30AM, and I recently got teary-eyed at one. Two years ago, we had a guy who came in straight from a real low point in his life. He started out as a custodian here. He won't



mind me sharing this; all I wanted him to do was go around the gym with a trashcan. He was such a hard worker. I am proud to say that now, he's the *General Manager* at our *Zone West* location.

While I was in there the other day, I just stood and watched him for a few minutes as he interacted with the members. In that short time, I had probably 30 members come up and tell me how this young man had changed their life. I just thought: Wow, to see this guy who came in here broken, couldn't look at you in the face, to where he is today, it just makes it all worthwhile. I love stories like that, and I just love seeing the staff grow.

**C.I.** - I love it, too. And, just imagine the exponential effect of it. You helped this one person. Then, he helps the 30 who actually told you about it. You know there's many more who didn't share or weren't in the club that day. Then, imagine what they are doing in their own lives to make something better for someone else just because of that experience... It's amazing to realize how much change you can make one person at a time.

**BM** - So true. When I was going through 2018, trying to figure out how to change myself, the consultant kept encouraging me to find my life's purpose. The consultant really helped me figure out that I just really love developing people. I love developing leaders. That's when I feel most fulfilled, so that's been my mindset ever since. It has been very rewarding.

**C.I.** - Closing out this fantastic interview,

emerging from the pandemic, what is on the horizon for *Zone Health & Fitness* over the next three to five years?

**BM** - We want to continue to develop and grow these locations. We are considering expanding the current locations, and then, we would love to maybe do at least another location in Ocala or maybe outside the community to prove that the concept works. It will all happen in God's timing.

■ ■ ■

Thank you to **Ben Marciano** for the hospitality shown to me when I visited *Zone East*. The tour was impressive and the on-site interview incredible. Based on Ben's words, we hope you are rejuvenated and/or revisit your Mission. Is your "why" to serve others? Thank you also to **Albert Shaw** for his assistance with photos and graphics.

*(Justin Cates is the Publisher of Club Insider. Having been born into a club business family in 1985, Justin grew up in the health and fitness club industry. He has lived and breathed this industry for 37 years, since his own day one, and he loves it dearly. Graduating from the Terry College of Business at The University of Georgia in 2007, Justin has run day-to-day operations of Club Insider for 14 years. Justin was elevated to Publisher of Club Insider on April 5, 2020. Justin's Dad, Norm Cates, continues to serve as Founder and Tribal Leader Since 1993. You can reach Justin by phone at 863-999-2677 or email at Justin@clubinsideronline.com.)*



Chief Greg Graham Legacy Walk (center treadmill was used by Chief Craig every workout)



9/11 Firefighter Stair Climb

# Finding Group Fitness Pros to Facilitate Growth

By: **Sara Kooperman, JD**

Health clubs are facing great challenges in staffing, especially in the group fitness arena. Group Fitness Instructors left their respective positions in droves during the pandemic. This is primarily because our group areas were forced to close, and virtual training is not something that comes naturally to all instructors. Also, this happened in large part because Group Fitness Instructors get paid the least amount of money for their time and efforts, and unfortunately, they are not respected by our industry as a whole. They usually appear as the last on the importance totem pole of our clubs. Our owners, CEOs, CFOs, Directors and Managers still look at group fitness as a non-revenue generating line in our chart of accounts. Yet, we all know that community connectors are in greater demand than ever.

Personal Trainers seem to have not suffered this similar fate. Personal Trainers are "personal." They have left

clubs and have gone out on their own realizing that they don't need to be "part of something." They can simply, "have it all!" And frankly, they can get it. They can train their clients outdoors or in their homes. All they need to do is have equipment that will transport easily and set up quickly. Trainers can simply throw on a mask (if the client is still a bit skittish), and they are ready to go!

Yet, now that we are open for business again, more and more industry leaders see the value of the large group and small group influencers. We need our Group Fitness Instructors more than ever! So, how do we find them, upskill them and keep them around?

To find quality Group Fitness Instructors, it might be best to look where we left off. Who were your best instructors that retired or changed careers because of the pandemic? Call them, email them, text them, and more than anything, get them to come home to your club, bribing them if you must! Tell them how much their clients need them, miss them and want them. Provide a base salary that covers more than the bare

minimum, and sweeten the deal by offering an extra \$3.00 per head if they attract more than five people to their class.

Group Fitness Instructors are not stupid; they know their value. They realize that their people (Your Clients) will follow them, and they have strong enough egos to understand that being loved doesn't hurt! While a percentage or incentive is needed by some, it may not be required by all. Think about simply asking them what it would take to get them back. They may want to keep their own, personal virtual program going with the revenue staying in their own pocket. They may have switched careers and need the class to start at a different time. Be flexible. Be open. But, be persistent! They will come back if the offer suits them!

If you can't get your oldies and besties back, look forward. One of the best places to find quality group exercise instructors and talented personal trainers is to reach out to clients. Reach out to current clients and members who are leaders in our clubs. We know these people. They



CUTLINE

are the popular clients that people tend to gravitate to and be friends with. They are the individuals who move up to the head of the room and stand directly in front of the instructor. They are the people who talk about how much weight they have (See *Sara Kooperman, JD* Page 17)

## HealthyCARE® Your Pathway to Future Growth

**MIAMI, FL** - *Smart Health Clubs* and *GENAVIX* announce the merger of their two companies, which are focused on bridging the gap between healthcare and fitness with the introduction of *HealthyCARE®*.

HealthyCARE® is a technology-based revenue generation solution. This solution allows club members to sign-up and pay for lifestyle programs and services, such as nutrition, fitness coaching and specialty services. These services will be offered by registered dietitians and certified coaches/practitioners, or with local, regional and national medical subject matter experts already participating in HealthyCARE® without any need to hire new staff.

All medical intervention, education and guidance is done in-person or virtually using telehealth. The HealthyCARE® app offers custom branding for each participating health club, gym, medical provider, employer or broker. HealthyCARE® provides employers a lower cost and significantly improved option that is designed to measure lifestyle and behavioral change while incentivizing and supporting their employees for better health and wellbeing.

The solution supports direct pay and HIPAA compliant insurance reimbursements already available in most commercial health insurance plans and with little to no investment required.

Smart Health Clubs continues to

offer an all-in-one member engagement software for the fitness industry, which includes a custom branded app, booking, instructor substitution, fitness plans, calendars with push notifications, digital marketing, ecommerce, tennis, pickleball and a complete virtual offering.

The combined companies together offer one brand, one technology platform and one app with targeted marketing capability to help grow your business through their revenue generating solution and app.

HealthyCARE® will be a game changer. It will empower any fitness facility (either a full-service health club or gym) to engage with local and national healthcare professionals to offer longer term and lower cost lifestyle management plans for those who need exercise and nutrition counseling the most.

The integrated solution from GENAVIX and Smart Health Clubs is your total solution for revenue generation. It opens a blue ocean of new revenue streams, non-dues revenue and new customers from the 80% non-exercise market outside of the four walls of your facility.

For more information, contact **Mike Alpert** or **Mike Benton** by phone at **(800) 536 - 6003** or email at **info@healthycare.com**. Learn more at **joinhealthycare.com**.

## REX Roundtables Announces Partnership with ITR Economics

**NEW YORK** - *REX Roundtables* announces its new partnership with *ITR Economics*, an economic forecasting firm that will provide REX Roundtables members and their companies with additional economic intelligence to drive practical and profitable business decisions.

Established in 1948, *ITR Economics* has earned its reputation for being *First in Forecasts Worldwide*. Their unique forecasting methodology sets them apart from the rest of the industry, empowering them to achieve an unmatched accuracy rating of 94.7%, four quarters into the future.

"With uncertainty in the current economy and the challenges of the past two years, the REX Team felt the partnership with ITR could provide valuable tools and insights to help all REX Members become even more successful!" said **Eddie Tock**, *CEO of REX Roundtables*.

Through this partnership, REX Roundtables Members will have access to several new resources, including:

- Monthly articles, providing ITR Economics' data-driven, non-affiliated perspective on current events will clear away the noise and allow true understanding of what is going on in the economy.

- Pilot Programs with subscription services:

- Insider™ empowers subscribers with the

most accurate economic data, enabling them to mitigate upcoming risk and make profitable decisions for their companies. The Insider subscription includes the ITR Advisor™, monthly Leading Indicator updates, a three-year US Economic Outlook Dashboard and topical webinars.

- **Trends Report™** provides the economic forecasts, insights and strategy to give your business the edge. Subscribe to this industry-leading forecasting publication and receive updated forecasts throughout the month, covering the complete spectrum of U.S. and world economies.

- **DataCast Essentials™** was designed for the entrepreneurial CEO who wants a near-term view of where the business is headed, as well as actionable intelligence. With this forward view in mind, what actions should be considered?

- **DataCast Pro™** was designed for the business leader or market analyst who wants a deep dive into market trends driving the business. The tool enables the finding of areas of opportunity, spot sectors that could pose a risk to the business and incorporate its analytical output into internal forecasting processes.

- Exclusive discounts on all online subscriptions and non-subscription services.

Learn more about the Rex Roundtables - ITR Economics partnership by contacting **eddie@rexroundtables.com**.



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Available positions vary by club. Visit [www.lafitness.com/careers](http://www.lafitness.com/careers) for more details. Photo depicts a typical facility; some locations may vary. ©2021 Fitness International, LLC. All rights reserved.

### ...Sara Kooperman, JD

continued from page 16

lost and the muscle they have gained by working out at your club. These are people who have a commitment and passion about health and wellness and a strong loyalty to your facility. These are the individuals who we must reach out to.

We will have to upskill our newcomers and possibly pay for their certifications and/or provide extra training, but they know and love us, will probably feel flattered to be asked and happy to join our teams. We can also work at recruiting experienced teachers and trainers by asking current staff for recommendations, but we must not stop there. It is a different world post-pandemic, and even getting applicants to show up for interviews has become a challenge.

We should reward those team members who recommend potential instructors. We should also provide another reward when the person they recommend shows up for the interview/tryout. And, we should reward them a third time when we hire that person AND they show up to work. We should also think about adding in a little something extra if the new staff stays six months. While this may cost us \$50 - \$100 each step of the way (totaling \$300 or more), it may well be worth it! Plus, if we find

a new staff member that has experience and a following, we will hopefully attract their followers to join our facility. This extra membership money certainly wouldn't hurt! Incentivizing the new staff to bring their following and get them to join (at \$50 per head to the new staff member) would help everyone!

You might also try calling your local competitor to see if he might be willing to share instructors. This should be an equal exchange of support. You may have to offer up one of your staff to join their team, as well. Reciprocity builds relationships. However, this does not always work. One might try to call the competitor's front desk and ask who the best instructor is on their team. Often, the front desk will quickly respond, but if they don't, the best instructor usually is the person in the 9:30AM or 5:30PM time slot (it is pretty obvious who the favorites are). Check your competitor's schedule online, find out who this instructor is and then google them. You can then find their LinkedIn, Facebook or Instagram pages, and you can message them to see if they would like to pick up an extra class.

*Please remember that we are all still "In this together." Stealing someone's best instructors is not a recommended business practice. But, finding out if this person wants or needs to add another class to their schedule is fair game.*

To attract instructors back and to find new teachers to join you, a club may need to provide certifications and education. This will make trainers and teachers want to work for you. Instructors need the latest in strategies, techniques and equipment. Not only does this help the individual instructor and trainer retain their loyalty to the facility that supplies them this valuable education, but this also helps the club retain a cutting edge, innovative and evolving image.

Clubs cannot simply retain a static persona. Health clubs and all sorts of wellness facilities must stay abreast of current trends. If a facility decides simply to do internal training, you end up with instructors and trainers cloning each other. This stagnates creativity and diminishes the quality of programming. Clients need and desire change and choices. Encouraging your trainers and group exercise instructors to attend outside events allows for and promotes personalization, creativity and diversity. Providing a monthly stipend or annual educational budget helps both your group fitness instructor and personal trainer as well as your facility in general.

Evaluating the change in the fitness industry post-COVID is possibly the most difficult task for an owner and manager. Directing this change requires flexibility and constant connection. Staying

close to what's working and what's not means that change is eminent and rapid. Looking ahead, we can see that the philosophy of exercise as medicine has made a significant impact on the public. The medical profession is encouraging fitness more and more, which legitimizes our industry. Finding and/or developing great instructors is more important than ever. This is where providing continuing education to this group is essential! We must keep a find, retain and reward our teachers and trainers financially, emotionally and educationally.

*(Sara Kooperman, JD, CEO of SCW Fitness Education and WATERinMOTION, is a visionary leader that has transformed the fitness education community. A successful business owner and advisor, she is a keynote speaker, published author, podcast presenter and sought-after industry trailblazer. Sara has a unique ability to share her passion and devotion towards fitness education through her humor, enthusiasm, and her effervescent non-nonsense personality. She serves on the Gold's Gym Think Tank, was on the Women in Fitness Association Board of Directors and is a proud inductee into the National Fitness Hall of Fame. Sara currently serves on IHRSA's Headlight Committees for Facility Standards and has left an indelible mark on the fitness industry.)*

# Equipment Financing

By: **Paul Bosley**

Equipment financing is a common option available to owners of fitness centers, group fitness centers and personal training studios when purchasing fitness equipment and non-fitness equipment. Non-fitness equipment that can be financed include security systems, entertainment systems, computer hardware and software, flooring, outdoor and indoor signage, as well as any tangible items needed to operate your business.

There are two basic types of equipment financing products:

**1. Equipment Leases** - Nearly all equipment leases available in the fitness industry are capital leases, so the equipment is owned by the leasing company and ownership is transferred to the business at the end of the lease term.

**2. Equipment Financing Agreements** offer financing where the ownership of the equipment remains with the business from the beginning. The company offering the financing files a lien until the final payment is made, and then, the lien is released.

The following are four key benefits to your business of leasing equipment:

**1. Conserve and Control Cash.** If your equipment requirements are relatively small and you have the available funds, it may be best to simply buy the equipment to avoid any fees and interest expense. However, if you require a substantial amount of equipment, why tie up a large amount of cash, especially when you could use that same money to grow your business in other ways? Equipment leasing saves your working capital for day-to-day business expenses, business expansions or unexpected business-related expenses. In addition to saving your working capital, a lease provides a pre-determined monthly line item, which can help you budget more effectively. With predictable monthly expenses, you can develop long-term plans for your business with confidence and get your business set up with the equipment you need, while keeping your cash flow available for other expenditures.

**2. Tax Benefits.** Lease financing presents your business with tax benefits with a

full deduction of lease payments against current earnings. In the case of equipment financing agreements, the interest expense is deductible, and the cost of the equipment can be depreciated over the estimated useful life of the equipment. Check with your tax advisor to determine the tax benefits of leasing for your business.

**3. More Attractive Balance Sheet.** Monthly lease payments are viewed as a business expense instead of long-term debt. Having debt that you are servicing on a timely basis will help secure financing to fund your business in the future, if needed.

**4. Upgrade Outdated Equipment.** Equipment leasing can help you stay on top of the latest advances in equipment and technology. How long do you plan to keep the asset? If you're only planning to keep the equipment for a specific period of time, you may find that leasing is a better alternative. You can also determine the length of your lease, so if you work with equipment and technology that changes rapidly, you can select a lease term to ensure you are always at the cutting edge in your industry.

The major manufacturers (*Life Fitness, Matrix, Precor*, etc.) have inhouse staff that offer and manage the equipment leasing process for their own brand of fitness equipment. One of the benefits of working with outside companies like ours is that we offer equipment financing that can combine invoices from a variety of manufacturers into one financing lease. The typical lease for existing businesses requires a one- or two-month security deposit and offer repayment term up to 60 months. Start-up businesses are typically required to pay a 20% down payment, and their repayment term ranges up to 36 months. Lease documentation fees range from \$95 to \$495 and are paid when the deposit is paid. All business owner(s) with more than 20% equity are required to personally guarantee the equipment lease, but the good news is that the equipment is the only collateral required! Our video about equipment leasing offers a good overview ([bit.ly/clubinsider143](http://bit.ly/clubinsider143)).

For more information, please contact **Paul Bosley** by email at [paul@businessfinancedepot.com](mailto:paul@businessfinancedepot.com), or you can visit [www.businessfinancedepot.com](http://www.businessfinancedepot.com).

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# Five Keys to Opening a New Facility

By: **Chris Stevenson**

When I opened our last club well over ten years ago, I remember it being a very stressful, crazy and exciting time. We weren't a franchise, so we literally had to do everything from scratch and by ourselves, from finding the location to creating all of the operating systems and everything in between. We had no compass; it was just us.

Having been through that process, I thought it might be helpful to share things to consider when opening a club. As I started prepping this article, I had a hard time figuring out where to start, since there are so many concerns that have to be addressed. Then, I came across a great article that IHRSA published entitled, *Top 5 Things Americans Consider When Choosing a Gym*. I figured that, since IHRSA identified what consumers are looking for, why not use these same ideas to guide best practices for opening and operating a facility?

The following five points of emphasis include what consumers consider to be crucial "must-haves," as well as my thoughts on how these can be used when planning to launch a brand-new business. Side note, this is also useful information for those currently operating a club.

## 1. Location.

Or, perhaps better stated, "Location, location, location!" It's no secret that a great location is key to success.

I have seen well-run facilities in bad locations struggle, and I have also seen poorly run facilities in a great location succeed. The real question is: How is a great location determined? Ample parking, easy ingress and egress, sufficient visibility, high volumes of drive-by and walk-by traffic, and of course, proximity to homes and businesses are all extremely important. The best location is one that offers convenience for prospective members.

The other thing I highly recommend is doing a "joiner" study. This is a study that quantifies the number of people residing or working within a certain radius of a prospective location who fit the age, gender and median income demographics of a typical gym member. It should also identify any potential competitors in the area and their typical capacities. This information will give you an idea of whether there are enough underserved individuals in your target market to allow you to be successful. While location isn't the only thing to consider, it can be the linchpin and is certainly a good starting point.

## 2. Does your gym offer the right equipment?

In addition to "right equipment," I would also include "right programming" as another essential consideration that should be settled prior to opening. While it is easier to change up programming once you pick your equipment, you are married to it for a while.

It is important to know who your typical client will be. Look at the demographics and psychographics of your chosen location, as well as the desired clientele to whom your brand will cater. For example, if your location is in a college town, there is a good chance you will have a younger membership base and one likely to have campus-based fitness options at its disposal. As such, you may want to skew the equipment to more free weights and functional equipment.

Once you are up and running, survey your members regularly to make sure that you are always providing the right equipment and programming as your operations evolve. Bottom line, continue striving to give the people in your area what they want.

## 3. Does your gym offer the right value equation?

In recent history, the trend has been to focus on competitive pricing; open a new club and make sure it is less expensive than the current clubs in the marketplace. However, consumer behavior has shifted, placing more importance on value than on price point. Consumers are now mostly concerned with getting value for their investment.

Think about it as positioning your new club as the area's best value in fitness. As you consider pricing, understand that you don't have to be the least expensive. You must simply make sure members are getting their money's worth. I would still advise to run an effective presale, with special offers and discount pricing for early adopters. People should be rewarded for demonstrating their trust in your yet-untested product. In short, know your value, pick a price that represents that value and always deliver on that value. Strategic and value-based pricing is key to the successful launch of a new facility.

Perhaps the shift in consumer attitude toward value was pushed along by the pandemic, raising both the importance of proper physical activity for a healthy life, as well as the importance of cleanliness standards in the eyes of consumers. Which brings me to the next point on our list.

## 4. Is your gym clean?

When I saw this among IHRSA's criteria, I had to laugh a little. Shouldn't cleanliness be a given?

Unfortunately, we are in an industry notorious for being dirty. I recall many times at clubs I've owned and operated when members told me how nice it was that the club was clean. I took this to mean other clubs they had used were not. COVID influenced members' desire to be in a clean facility so much so that it is now a top-five buying criterion. Keep this in mind as you design your facility. Think about open floor plans to facilitate sanitation practices and more wipe stations to give patrons an active role in the cleanliness of their club.

Moreover, cleanliness is also reflected in organization and lack of clutter. Minds may subconsciously perceive inorganization and clutter as dirty. As you are planning your club, all of this applies to your strategic presale, an indispensable best practice for a successful open. Apply all of the above advice to your presale area. Make it clean, not cluttered. A first impression will set the standard for your new club and establish an ongoing operational benchmark. The saying, "cleanliness is next to Godliness," is no longer cliché in the gym industry. It is dogma.

## 5. Does your gym have a great atmosphere?

While the physical environment is essential for the successful launch of a new facility (walls, roof, design, layout, equipment, etc.), so is the atmosphere.

Atmosphere, simply defined, is the experience you create for members and the way that you make them feel. Once operating, this means well-trained staff members who are positive, engaging, demonstrating great body language, owning questions and going out of their way to make every single member feel like the most important person in the world. The goal should be to have members leave feeling better than when they arrived. I always tell my teams that I want members to say, "I can't believe my gym did that," but mean it in a good way.

Surprise and delight always. Like the last point about cleanliness, this starts in your presale. For a club to open successfully, the presale must be successful, and for the presale to be successful, the atmosphere matters. In a presale, people are buying the promise of not only a great facility but an exceptional experience. Prospects need to be met with



Chris Stevenson

energy, enthusiasm and an immediate sense that they're the VIPs that they truly are.

A great atmosphere, combined with a clean and organized physical environment, is the one-two punch of any first impression and the foundation on which future success will be built.



Find a great location, offer the ideal equipment and programming based on your target clientele, provide the best bang-for-your-buck value, maintain high cleanliness standards and train your staff to create the warmest, most inviting atmosphere possible. These are the indispensables of success. Not because I told you; this is what consumers are telling us. Any business in any industry will achieve success if it delivers to consumers the experiences they desire.

*Thank you to Athletic Business for the authorization to reprint this article.*

*(Chris Stevenson, former Power Ranger stuntman, is the Founder of The Empower Group, a full-service consulting firm with services ranging from staff training, workshops, full facility management and more. Stevenson has over 20 years of experience in many aspects of the health and fitness industry. In addition, he is an international speaker who regularly presents at IHRSA, Athletic Business, Club Industry and many other fitness and business events. From health and wellness to business strategies, Chris has the unique ability to instantaneously connect with people and to present viable, applicable lectures that resonate with every audience. Chris can be reached by phone at 818-519-6038 or email at [chris@stevensonempowers.com](mailto:chris@stevensonempowers.com).)*

# Are You Ready for the Bubble to Burst?

By: **Thomas Plummer**

The fitness industry is balancing precariously on top of the perfect bubble, and this bubble, as they all do, will burst, causing yet another reset in an already unstable fitness business environment.

Our economy has been dancing bubble to bubble since the early 1900s, which presents itself as the typical cycle in any capitalistic society. We had the mind-numbing correction of 1929 we labeled *The Great Depression*, the cooldown of the 1950s, the gas crash of the '70s, the real estate busts of the mid '80s and late '90s, then *The Great Recession* in 2007, and of course, a number of bubble busts such as real estate and tech collapses. Bubbles are what we do in the U.S., and we do them well. As a country, we have used them as a correction device that allows us to reset, cool off a sector, then move on to the next level of play.

This time, the virus has changed the game for our economy, and most importantly, has created a bubble for us in this industry due to be corrected going in 2023. But, what caused this bubble, and what does it mean for the fitness industry in the coming years?

During the mid '80s, I was working on the money side of the fitness industry. One of my first tradeshows was *IDEA* at the height of the aerobics boom (another bubble burst). There I stood in my little booth, one of maybe fifty men on a tradeshow floor with about a thousand women wandering booth to booth, mostly dressed in their aerobic outfits. I called my boss and told him I was never coming home, I had found nirvana, and this must be fitness heaven. Later, standing in a crowded bar, I realized even the ugliest guy of the fifty had a chance to meet someone that night.

The point of this nonsensical story is that *temporary scarcity drives demand*. For a few years, if you were a young and single male, working an *IDEA* show was a wonderful place to meet women. Eventually, as aerobics faded and the professional trainer arrived, the numbers evened up and the scarcity theory corrected itself.

The virus created this scarcity event in the fitness world. We had at least 30% of all the fitness facilities in the country close during the COVID era, either directly due to the immediate loss of members or in the secondary wave where past due rents, gym political stances, failure to keep members during the shutdowns or just bad management of the government money the owners did receive closed those barely hanging on from the previous two years.

Today's bubble was created because the industry has the same number of members we did in 2019, but now, they have to crowd into a gym market with 30%

fewer players, again a form of temporary scarcity. The virus faded, the members came back, business looks like the boom days of the early '70s, and even the worst gym operators still open are seeing growth again. And, how many of those \$2,000 home cycles, along with their expensive monthly fees, are now the world's most expensive underwear drying racks?

However, this scarcity event, again too many members/not enough gyms, will correct. We will reach a saturation point revealing several of the big flaws the virus managed to conceal, trends that are already in place and taking their own failing path in late 2019 and early 2020. Here are a few expected trends/predictions for the coming year as we enter our bubble bursting correction period:

## The false sense of boom period will lure investors into big mistakes.

Nothing says correction like the shoeshine boy indicator. In 1929, **Joe Kennedy Sr.** was having his shoes shined, and the shine boy, not knowing who he was, started giving him tips on what stocks to buy in the market. The market had been good to Kennedy in the 1920s, and he created vast wealth through the boom period of that decade. But, a shoeshine boy playing the market scared the hell of Kennedy. He immediately went back to his office, unloaded most of his stock portfolio, then took shorted it, creating a second wave of extreme wealth.

The shoeshine boys are the current investors. The market is booming (remember same old members and too few gyms today), and there isn't anywhere else for investors to play since retail and tech is somewhat stagnant and not nearly as sexy as the fitness industry. So, we have investment groups gobbling up regional players, expanding too quickly and overpaying for the units they are buying. All of this spells saturation, and saturation means we will end up with too many big boxes and not enough clients to fill them.

We have seen this before; we just have short memories. Back in the day, *Bally's*, which had about 440 clubs at their peak in 2007 was the largest chain in the world, and they fueled their expansion with junk bonds. We saw *Living Well* rise to international fame, fueled by an outside investment group, then fade as markets corrected, and we ended up with a dated business concept in a heavily competitive market.

There are several other potential red flags the investment groups are throwing up as well. When you buy up dozens of owner/operator businesses, then replace those owners with managers at some point, you end up owning a chain

of investments you can no longer manage. Now, you need an infrastructure to manage what you accidentally destroyed in the first place. And, there isn't usually much room for error if you overpaid heavily for the business during a boom when everyone wants to buy and not much is for sale.

We will also see more losers buying losers. If your business acquisitions are stumbling, because you the investor do not understand how to run them, and more importantly, understand how to evolve them, you tend to buy more losers to prop up your numbers and to show your own investors growth.

This means we see small investment groups buying already end of the line franchises. This means we see investors buying companies to flip them, get caught by the economy, throw in the token Pepsi or Home Depot wandering CEO to save them, and you end up, as we have now throughout the industry, with investors owning companies in an industry they do not understand or are not willing to learn. Everything looks good in a bubble because everything seems underpriced, but at some point, you get stuck, and that will be the gift of the bubble burst in the next year or so.

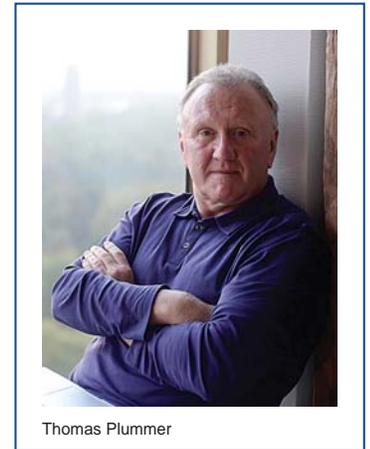
## Too many imitators.

Shades of the '90s and the *Curves* phenomenon. How many *Curves* imitators showed up just after their peak years? Everyone wanted a piece of the action... But, what did happen to *Liberty Fitness*, *Butterfly Life* and all those next generation *Curves* imitators?

In a bubble driven money environment, everyone looks hot so, hey, they must be right; let's just copy them. But, who remembers number three in any category? **Jack Welch** was right, and still is. He took over *GE*, looked at the fat on the spread sheets and decided to cut down all the non-profitable divisions that prior management had added. His rule was simple: If second or third in a category, then close it, dump it or sell it cheap, just cut the loss.

Who is third place in the team training franchise business? Who is third place in the mainstream box chain segment? Who is third place in the Pilates brands? And, who cares, because the consumer does not seem to see much value...

The exception, of course, are regional players, who can fit into a national debate and successfully compete against the national players, but it takes a lot of discipline to stay regional, master your market and not buy random businesses in states where you are not known and are not competitive.



Thomas Plummer

## Team training was saved by the virus.

Team training was fading in 2019. The narrowly-focused, one-product gyms chasing that 24 - 40 client who loves to hang out with 30 others in a small 1,800 square-foot box started to walk away in 2019, but again, the virus corrected and the virus saved. Those team concepts still in business now have 30% fewer competitors, yet when the members still engaged with the concept reemerged, these survivors gained a second life, and business is now good again.

However, signs of death were there prior to the virus. Saturation in many markets, an endless string of imitators, the surprising stumbling of a few key category leaders, the start of price wars (always the death blow to the brand) and a client who had been there and done that and who was now ready for the next evolution, all lead to having too many players competing for too few members willing to stay with the concept.

The bubble means we have new players in the class, chasing the apparent and transparent growth, and we can already see price discounting happening again as new owners take over the closed facilities and add that additional competition factor in the market.

## Someone will get home fitness right.

The home fitness players are targeting the wrong market. But, someone will figure it out, and when they do get it right, we will again see significant drain from the mainstream facilities.

One of my clients with multiple units added an online aspect to his business to support his at-home clients and to maybe attract new ones who needed serious help and guidance during the virus. The surprising result was the first few enrollments were women who have never

(See **Thomas Plummer** Page 21)

# The Rocky Road That Got Us Here

By: **Jeffrey Pinkerton**

In early March of 2009, when my boys were ten and thirteen, I coerced them into mountain biking. By that, I mean we bought them new bikes, helmets, gloves, and I convinced them it would be a ton of fun. I had been a road cyclist for a few years and was looking for a way to spend more time with them and less time on the busy roads of the Atlanta suburbs. All smiles on a Saturday morning, we set off with a few snacks, a few water bottles, a map of the park and a can-do attitude; we were ready and excited. Things were looking pretty good.

We arrived at the trailhead, strapped on our helmets, double-checked our bikes and brakes with a few laps

around the parking lot, then hit the trail. We slugged our way through the best we could. We slid and scuffed our way slowly down hills and fought our way up some steep slopes. Even though we had a lot of experience riding bikes, riding trails was quite different. Going slow on the downhills, we lost speed and precariously teeter-tottered our bikes over rocks and roots. Without forward momentum, we were making things more difficult. Without the speed of the downhill, the next uphill was that much more challenging.

If you have ever watched experienced mountain bikers, two things stand out:

1. They use gravity to their benefit. Great mountain bikers actually look more like

downhill skiers than cyclists. They hop over obstacles, use winding trail-banks to grab more speed. They use one downhill to propel themselves up the next hill. And, when things look most precarious (rocks, roots, ravines), they actually go faster, not slower. "You need to go faster on the downhill," one friendly mountain biker mentioned to me during a water break. "It might feel odd and even a little scarier, but it's actually safer."

2. Experienced mountain bikers hope they won't --but know they probably will-- spin out, skid, fall, flip and crash. There is actually a ton of advice online on how to crash safely, ranging from "tuck, roll, and relax" to "heavy feet, light hands." There (See **Jeffrey Pinkerton** Page 22)



Jeffrey Pinkerton

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set foot in a gym and never will. The true client for the home market is not the workout-bra-wearing, ripped ab model or the shirtless guy with the perfectly styled hair slightly glowing from the sweat, as his perfect children look on with his perfect spouse waiting her turn, while he engages with the perfect instructor, also semi-naked, shrieking how cool it is to be one of four hundred riders in the group today.

Surprisingly, those clients, the gym experienced generation, fled immediately back to the facilities as soon as they could because they are part of and need the live group dynamic... Yet, those first few women who have never set foot in the gym and feel hugely self-conscious about their bodies but understand fitness can help change their lives are still paying, still online and would not dream of quitting.

The online players self-destructed but are regrouping and will figure out that professional athletes, shredded fitness models or the need to be shrieking along with a hundred others does not sell in a virus-free era, and the true buyer, never shown, is the overweight accountant who will dedicate home time to fitness if someone would just understand what he wants and how they want it, though it hasn't been given to them, yet. The buyer is there; the marketing and targeted client presently used is horrendous.

**The upscale, target specific business model is the next, big thing.**

The 3,000 - 7,000 square-foot training-centric gym, with three hundred and fifty clients paying about \$300 per month average, is the biggest untapped market left. These clients are recession proof; engage in fitness for life; are stable, meaning they stay longer and pay longer;

and are not price sensitive. In fact, this affluent client, usually the top 40% by wealth in their communities, is actually underserved in today's fitness world.

Most mainstream players try to squeeze this client into their box, but the major chains only report 6% of their clients are paying for training. This group simply does not want to be one of many, yet you could insert a training-centric gym into a box, add separate facilities and have a good upsell. Or, more logically, why does any of the major franchises not recognize this buyer and add another, upper level, franchise option? It worked for *Gap*, *Old Navy* and *Banana Republic* for decades.

This category is emerging, players in many markets have long validated this concept, and as they grow, they will continue to drain the top clients

out of the boxes and team concepts, again adding another dimension to the bubble bursting theory.

### Summary

What does all of this mean? We will be corrected, and it will be painful. Growth in the wrong segments, fueled by investors not grounded in the industry, the alarm raised by the new wave of imitators, the coming correction of the team concept, the possible second coming of the online drain of clients, and finally, it is just time.

The good news! As in all chaos, there is opportunity. But, we have to understand it will be different, the client has changed expectations and the investment money, as it always does, will dry up. The industry will grow, but the players left

standing will have to change how they think and what they want from this business.

*(Thomas Plummer has been one of the primary thought leaders in the fitness industry for over 40 years. His approach of change through leadership, delivered in the 1,100+ workshops he has taught all around the world since 1980, has resulted in the creation of many of the current business concepts now in use in the industry, such as the modern training gym business model and layered pricing structure used by so many financially successful fitness businesses. He is perhaps best known for helping young fitness professionals understand and master the business side of the gym business. You can contact Thom at [info@thomasplummer.com](mailto:info@thomasplummer.com).)*

## Crunch Fitness Celebrates Two Million Member Mark

**NORWALK, CT** - *Crunch Fitness* marks the milestone of reaching two million members at the full-service fitness brand. This achievement comes as *Crunch* continues to outpace the industry in membership growth, earning its spot as the number one high-value, low-price franchise gym.

The two-millionth member, **Julia Dever**, signed up at *Crunch Norwalk* in Connecticut, where she was surprised with a special celebration and awarded \$2,000 worth of prizes, including a complimentary two-year gym membership and various gifts.

"We are proud to welcome our two-millionth member to the *Crunch* family," said **Jim Rowley**, *Worldwide CEO of Crunch Fitness*. "This has been an impressive run and is a testament to all of the *Crunch* team members worldwide who have contributed to our continued expansion. With new acquisitions and franchise clubs in the pipeline, we can't wait to get to three million

members next."

*Crunch* has consistently demonstrated increased growth since it began franchising in 2010, currently experiencing 30% growth from pre-COVID-19 membership levels and recently celebrating the opening of its 400th gym. After starting franchising in 2010, *Crunch* needed seven years to reach one million members. Growth has accelerated since then, with the brand growing from one million to two million members in less than five years behind a 15% compound annual member growth rate.

"Our franchisees have been hugely instrumental in the strength and growth of the *Crunch* brand and have allowed us to cross this two million mark," said **Ben Midgley**, *CEO of Crunch Franchise*. "The past two years have been a challenge to the fitness industry. But, thanks to our loyal members and the dedication of our franchisees, *Crunch*



has led the health club industry in growth throughout the pandemic."

*Crunch Fitness* has climbed the franchise ranks year after year and is now in the Top 50 of the *Entrepreneur* 500 ranking. And, the U.S. Retail National Report has identified *Crunch* as one of the top 10 retailers in the nation for new retail space signed in 2021.

**...Jeffrey Pinkerton**

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is also something called an Over the Bars (OTB) crash. At the time, we had never heard of an OTB crash, but after a few hours of riding, tired but gaining confidence, I got to witness my youngest son in a textbook OTB situation.

Going downhill, with a moderate amount of speed, he hit a big and sudden drop, sending his handlebars down abruptly, while at the same time jolting his seat upwards. As he screamed and swerved, his bike went to the right, headed off the trail. Then, while holding the handlebars and his back wheel heading more vertical, he swung his legs around and over the bars.

He landed on his feet, ran forward a few steps and shoved the bike forward, sending it and not him, crashing to the ground.

Only a few yards behind him, I jumped off my bike, gave him a big hug and congratulated him on an amazing dismount. "What in the WORLD!?" Standing and safe, but clearly shaken, he was stunned. He couldn't decide if he should laugh or cry. "YOU LANDED ON YOUR FEET! That was awesome!!!" And, after a few minutes of pep-talking and bike-checking, I urged him to hop back on his bike. We still had plenty of work to do to get back to the parking lot.

In early March of 2020, at MOSSA, we were hosting our second *Leadership Academy Summit*. We were deep in preparations, and I was hosting a webcast

to prepare participants for the three-day event. I was all smiles and energetic on a Wednesday afternoon. I had my notes, some highlights to share and a can-do attitude; we were ready and excited. Things were looking pretty good.

A few days later came the worldwide spin out, skid, fall, flip and crash. All COVID broke loose, and the world (and fitness industry) abruptly shut down.

Here we are in 2022, countless rocks, roots and ravines later, where we've learned that the businesses and relationships that will land on their feet --rebound and recover the quickest-- will be those that use the momentum of the downhill for the next uphill.

While it might feel odd, and

maybe even a little scarier, moving forward confidently and quickly is better than inching forward cautiously, apologetically and skeptically. And, those people who get back to work, back to their mission and back to making an impact will be the ones who figure out a way to swerve, jump, clear obstacles and land on their feet. Like my son on that trail, we can't hit the ground, but we have to hit the ground running.

*(Jeffrey Pinkerton is the Business Development Manager for MOSSA. Jeffrey can be reached by phone at 770-989-4737 or email at jeffreypinkerton@mossa.net.)*

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