



The Fitness Movement and the Fitness Center Industry, 1960-2000

Marc Stern

Since the 1960s, the nature of recreational physical fitness activity in the United States has changed considerably. By 2000, private fitness centers were ubiquitous features on the American landscape. Increasingly centralized ownership characterized the field from 1970 onward. Men and, more significantly, women, joined, left, and rejoined these ever-more mechanized establishments. Images of health, beauty, professional success, and sexuality emphasized athleticism and muscle tone. Fitness took on an especially powerful meaning to women affected by the burgeoning feminist movement, their new economic roles, the rise of women's sports, and the volatile marital and social environment. Fitness centers also emerged as social centers where people went to see and meet members of the opposite or same sex. Paradoxically, as this greater focus on the body and formalized exercise occurred for some, a larger portion of the population grew increasingly unhealthy and obesity became a problem among all age cohorts.

Prior to the 1970s, relatively few Americans exercised routinely. In 1960, for example, only 24 percent claimed to exercise regularly.¹ However, something changed over the next two decades. "A new class has come among us," intoned *New York Magazine* in 1978, "that defines elitism in an entirely different manner. For this is the time of the Physical Elite, a class of American men, women, and children who are . . . exercising—a little, a moderate amount, or in staggering gulps."² By 1987, a Gallup poll trumpeted that 69 percent of Americans said they exercised regularly.³ In this paper, I report on one aspect of that growth, the rise of the

¹ J. D. Reed, et al., "America Shapes Up," *Time* 118 (2 Nov. 1981): 95.

² John Van Doorn, "An Intimidating New Class: The Physical Elite," *New York Magazine* (May 1978), 36.

³ Joel Gurin, and T. George Harris, "Taking Charge: The Happy Health Confidants," *American Health* (March 1987), 53.

Marc Stern <mstern@bentley.edu> is chair of the History Department at Bentley College, Waltham, Mass.

commercial fitness center from 1960 to 2000. Although they were not entirely new, the emergence of fitness centers was driven by cultural changes that swept along a significant part of several generations and helped transform the nation's physical and intimate geography and the leisure habits and attitudes of millions of Americans. Millions more resisted the siren call of crashing weights and pulsing disco music; indeed, a majority of Americans do not belong to gyms, and unfitness and obesity have become acute American problems, but clubs have become fixtures in the lives of three generations. Interest has waxed and waned, but the industry's growth has continued.⁴ Although there is a large sociological, philosophical, and gender studies literature devoted to the fitness movement, historians have not yet ventured to analyze recent trends.⁵ This essay is a gesture in that direction.⁶

⁴ Joseph Pereira, "The Exercise Boom Loses Its Strength," *Wall Street Journal*, 9 Jan. 1989, B1. This resulted, he argued, from a decline in leisure time, increased demands for attention to family, boredom, and a sense of realism. The number of clubs dipped from 14,000 to 9,000 between 1987 and 1990, but by 1995, there were almost 16,000 clubs in the United States alone; see McCarthy, *IHRSA's Guide to the Club Industry for Lenders & Investors*, 2d ed. (Boston, 2004), 2.

⁵ See Barry Glassner, *Bodies: Why We Look the Way We Do and How We Feel About It* (New York, 1988); John D. Fair, *Muscle Town USA: Bob Hoffman and the Manly Culture of York Barbell* (University Park, Pa., 1999); Susan Bordo, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (New York, 1999); Donn Welton, ed., *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader* (Malden, Mass., 1999); Blair Sabol, *The Body of America* (New York, 1986); Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993); Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York, 1998); Nancy Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* (New York, 1999); Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago, 1983); Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (New York, 1992). On the history of fitness, see Harvey Green, *Fit For America: Health, Fitness, Sport and American Society* (New York, 1986); Elliot Gorn and Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports* (New York, 1993). There is also an extensive literature about the sociology of the gym, but very little about the fitness industry per se. The historical and sociological literature on exercise includes several recent works that examine the relationship among various forms of exercise and broader cultural issues. See especially Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2007); Alan M. Klein, *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction* (Albany, N.Y., 1993). For the most part, the work of historians has focused on developments before the first half of the twentieth century. See Jack W. Berryman and Roberta J. Park, eds., *Sport and Exercise Science: Essays in the History of Sports Medicine* (Urbana, Ill., 1992); Frances B. Cogan, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (Athens, Ga., 1989); Michael Anton Budd, *The Sculpture Machine: Physical Culture and Body Politics in the Age of Empire* (New York, 1997). Exceptions include Roberta Pollack Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at*

What were the sources of the fitness changes that did occur? Health, of course, played a part in it. The idea of fitness partly sprang from “a growing awareness of the deteriorating physical condition of most Americans.” A nation plagued by heart, lung, and blood vessel disease confronted its “inactivity and obesity.”⁷ Exercise became preventative medicine for individuals increasingly aware of medicine’s limitations, a way to reduce disease, and, with proper oversight, to improve and extend healthy living for young and old alike.⁸ The shift to less physical work played a role in this transition. After all, one journalist noted, “we men and women of the 20th century are probably the only beings in the long history of mankind who have found it necessary to intentionally seek out forms of exercise to keep ourselves fit.”⁹ Jane Fonda, the actress/activist/fitness evangelist/entrepreneur, argued, “exercise isn’t a panacea for everything. . . . But there’s no question that much of what ails us can be lessened by making the heart and lungs really work.”¹⁰

Corporations took note of exercise costs and benefits. Hundreds of firms established in-house fitness centers or contracted with local gyms or fitness centers to promote healthful exercise for all or, more often, for some “higher-value” employees.¹¹ “Busy but sedentary executives are vulnerable to ailments that may be related to lack of exercise,” costing

War with Their Bodies (New York, 1989); Lynne Luciano, *Looking Good: Male Body Image in Modern America* (New York, 2001).

⁶ The fitness industry did not gain its own census category until the 1992 Census of Industry. Statistical data on the industry before that accounting are problematic. The “ballpark” figures cited before 1992 are compiled from popular press materials. Much of the information is derived from the somewhat hard-to-use tables in John McCarthy, *IHRSA’s Guide to the Club Industry for Lenders & Investors*, 2d ed. (Boston, 2004). For the popular press sources for these data, please contact the author. I also rely heavily on trade journals, the popular magazine press, and newspapers. I also make extensive use of sociological, philosophical, and literary sources.

⁷ On this question, see especially Benjamin G. Rader, “The Quest for Self-Sufficiency and the New Strenuousness: Reflections on the Strenuous Life of the 1970’s and 1980’s,” *Journal of Sport History* 18 (Summer 1991): 255-66; A. Eisenman and C. Robert Barnett, “Physical Fitness in the 1950’s and 1970’s: Why Did One Fail and the Other Boom?” *Quest* 31 (#1), 114-22; Michael S. Goldstein, *The Health Movement: Promoting Fitness in America* (New York, 1992); Ruth Clifford Engs, *Clean Living Movements: American Cycles in Health Reform* (Westport, Conn., 2000); Barry Glassner, “Fit for Modern Selfhood,” in *Symbolic Interaction and Cultural Studies*, ed. Howard S. Becker and Michael M. McCall (Chicago, 1990), 215-39.

⁸ Jeffrey Stool, “A Physical Fitness Plan for the Elderly,” *New York Times*, 20 Feb. 1977, p. 374.

⁹ Ted Kreiter, “The Aerobic Hustle,” *Saturday Evening Post* (Oct. 1978), 22.

¹⁰ Jane Fonda, “*Harper’s Bazaar* (Jan. 1980), 83.

¹¹ David F. White, “New Product of General Foods: The Physically Fit Employee,” *New York Times*, 30 May 1974; “Keeping Fit in the Company Gym,” *Fortune* 92 (Oct. 1975), 136-43.

firms, *Fortune* estimated in 1975, \$700 million in losses annually. Others thought the figure much higher. Fitness was presumed to increase productivity, reduce absenteeism, enable recruitment and retention, and improve morale, especially when encouraged and subsidized by the firms.¹² Companies increasingly pushed fitness among their managers. “In the ‘60s,” remarked one corporate “healthie,” “we talked about saving executives through physical fitness. In the ‘70s we’re doing it.”¹³ By the late 1970s, executives at *Forbes* magazine who did not exercise found themselves “gently admonished.” As Malcolm Forbes himself noted, “it gives the whole firm a sense of team spirit.”¹⁴ One study noted that 91 percent of executives exercised regularly by 1987, far beyond the national norm. “Wellness” became an important theme for industry and a mark of the right to rule.¹⁵

However, the craze sprang from other sources as well. For part of the population, “it’s less and less acceptable to be either obese or out of shape,” wrote Dr. Warren Guild as early as 1971: “Fitness has to do with vanity, an entirely normal thing. Anyone who says he doesn’t want to look neat and trim, i.e., sexy, is a damn liar. People don’t do things that are only good for them—they have to have motivations other than health.”¹⁶

Emerging from the 1960s, youth consciousness encouraged this trend. “It’s part of a youth kick,” observed Dr. James E. Nixon of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. “No one can appear not young any more. . . . We are enamored of youth. And what is the hallmark of youth? Use of the body instead of the brain.”¹⁷ The “beautiful body . . . one that is well-toned from exercise” came to symbolize the virtue of the “owner.”¹⁸ While doctors discussed the physical benefits of exercise and others touted its psychic high, those who made exercise “a way of life,” those who worked out regularly at fitness centers, increasingly acknowledged, “I just like to

¹² “Keeping Fit in the Company Gym”; “Corporate Fitness,” *IRSA News* 2 (July 1982): 1. Others estimated the losses at a much higher figure, including some as high as \$25 billion per year from premature death of employees. Leslie Bennetts, “American Capitalism Sees the Profit in Physical Fitness,” *New York Times*, 12 June 1978, B14. Bennetts notes that some firms, such as Kimberly Clark in Wisconsin, opened facilities to all “salaried employees,” but that most “are less democratic.” “. . . the fact is,” said Exxon’s medical director, “that the company has a bigger investment in executives than it does in nonexecutives.”

¹³ Sharon Nelson, “The Executive Body,” *Holiday* (Jan. 1974), 33.

¹⁴ H. F. Waters, “Keeping Fit,” *Newsweek* (23 May 1977), 79.

¹⁵ “Fitness in America: Is It Real?” *IRSA Club Business* 8 (Jan. 1987): 24; “New Health Plans Focus on Wellness,” *New York Times*, 24 Aug. 1981, D1.

¹⁶ Dr. Warren Guild, “Fitness Forever,” *Vogue* (May 1971), 172.

¹⁷ A. J. Snider, “Exercise Not Always Beneficial,” *Science Digest* (March 1973), 53.

¹⁸ Nancy Beach, “The New Fitness,” *New York Times Magazine* (7 Oct. 1979), 78-79.

have a nice-looking body.”¹⁹ This aesthetic led to a rise in bodybuilding among both men and women, especially after the release of both *Pumping Iron* and *Pumping Iron II (The Women)*, in 1977 and 1985, respectively. The *New York Times* remarked on that sport’s growth as early as 1975, when it noted a five-fold increase in turnouts at bodybuilding events and the increased consumption of bodybuilding supplements and products. Although some disparaged bodybuilding as antithetical to real health or strength, others promoted it as a vehicle to fitness and self-esteem.²⁰ Serious builders took to it in a major way, obsessively developing more and more muscular bodies and ingesting steroids to do it. As one former Mr. America jokingly remarked in 1972, the number of competitive bodybuilders using steroids ranged “between 99 and 101 percent.”²¹

Critics such as Christopher Lasch denounced the body fetishism he observed as one of many “. . . strategies of narcissistic survival [that] now present themselves as emancipation from the repressive conditions of the past, thus giving rise to a ‘cultural revolution’ that reproduces the worst features of the collapsing civilization it claims to criticize.” In this narcissistic moment, people seek “not personal salvation,” but “the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security.” “Harmless in themselves,” he argued, “these pursuits elevated to a program and wrapped in the rhetoric of authenticity and awareness, signify a retreat from politics and a repudiation of the recent past.”²² Others such as commentator Studs Terkel agreed, concluding that narcissism “comes when you’re not connected to the rest of the world.” Body fetishism, he observed, is a “solo act.”²³ However, it was a solo act conducted along with millions of others, a demonstration of collective individualist conformity by people who watched the same movies and TV shows, who saw the same advertising, and who consumed the same products and cultural images of beauty, sexuality, masculinity, femininity, power, and identity. Formed by commercial media featuring stars, models, and Californians who portrayed themselves as normal, this view presented bodies worked, pumped, drugged, and shaped by surgery, bodies that represented human capital at its most basic.²⁴ Consumers internalized these fantasies masquerading as normalcy and took them as their own.

¹⁹ Jonathon Diamond, “Fitness: The Facts and the Foolishness,” *McCalls Monthly* (July 1979), 49; Eric Starkman, “Converting the Cult of High-Tech Fitness,” *Macleans* (Oct. 1981), 55.

²⁰ Vicki Goldberg, “Body Building: Is It an Art, a Sport, or Sheer Exhibitionism,” *New York Times*, 30 Nov. 1975, p. 264.

²¹ Nicholas Wade, “Anabolic Steroids,” *Science* (30 June 1972), 1400.

²² Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York, 1979), 21, 31, 33.

²³ Reed, “America Shapes Up,” 104-5.

²⁴ Regarding the “Californication” of this process, see “Fitness Game,” *Mademoiselle* (April 1978), 177-201; and Alexandra Penney, “Keeping Fit in California,” *New York Times Magazine*, 8 Jan. 1978, p. 58; Tim Richards, “Why Interest in Fitness Is Not a Fad!” *IRSA News* 2 (Oct. 1982), 10.

This included visions of male and female beauty articulated by gay cultural arbiters in fashion, advertising, and film, and bodies sold to children in cartoons and action figures.²⁵ Real men and women, they learned, were pumped or skinny beyond any normal, or typical, human reality.²⁶ As sociologist Barry Glassner suggests, these new bodies are simulacra, “representations for which there are no originals,” imitations of “technologically induced copies of copies.” They thrived in the new postmodern environment, where form was all and the visual signified virtue.²⁷ As AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) increasingly devastated the gay community, physique served many as a testimony of health, of life itself, although as early as 1982, the *New York Times* was noting a gay community that, even more than the straight, belonged “to a health club.” Focused on masculinity, “the gay man probably has a much greater interest in his physical well-being than the average man on the street,” noted *Advocate* publisher Peter Frisch.²⁸

Many who supported the fitness movement agreed. “Most of the people my age have been through the drug scene, Viet Nam, protesting and all that,” said one gym owner. “Now instead of being a workaholic . . . we want something to equate how we feel about ourselves. You spend more time on something like exercise, you may like yourself a little better.”²⁹ Exercise, and especially public exercise, came to signify mental, emotional, and even spiritual health and virtue as well as fitness.³⁰ Fitness, intoned running trailblazer and publisher Jim Fixx, is part of “a distinctly self-centered mood. . . . Having lost faith in much of society, government, business, marriage, the church and so on—we seem to have turned to ourselves, putting what faith we can muster in our own minds and bodies.”³¹ The baby boomers’ hard-learned sense of their limits in the real world encouraged attitudes toward exercise and fitness that were more expansive. “We have control over few things in our lives,” said Dr. Robert Brown, an exercise analyst, so “exercise is one of the only means we have

²⁵ See Bordo, *The Male Body*. On gay elements of the body culture in sport, see Brian Pronger, *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality, and the Meaning of Sex* (New York, 1990); and Klein, *Little Big Men*, 194-233.

²⁶ See Harrison G. Pope, Jr., Katharine A. Phillips, and Roberto Olvardia, *The Adonis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession* (New York, 2000). They pay special attention to visual images of the body as presented via action figures; see especially pp. 41 and 43.

²⁷ Barry Glassner, “Fitness and the Postmodern Self,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 30 (June 1989): 184, 180-191.

²⁸ Karen Stabiner, “Tapping the Homosexual Market,” *New York Times Sunday Magazine* (2 May 1982), 35, 74. On the meaning of the body in the age of AIDS, see Susan Sontag, “AIDS and Its Metaphors,” in *Illness as Metaphor, and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York, 1989), 93-183.

²⁹ Reed, “America Shapes Up,” 103.

³⁰ See Muriel Gillick, “Health Promotion, Jogging, and Pursuit of a Moral Life,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 9 (Fall 1984): 380-82.

³¹ Van Doorn, “An Intimidating New Class,” 36-40.

to gain a sense of mastery and self-actualization.”³² Moreover, the improved self-image, sense of entitlement, public validation, and satisfaction that came with exercise and “fitness,” whether real or simply visual and virtual, fueled the movement’s expansion. These attitudes also came with risks, both physical and psychological or spiritual. Many, such as Jim Fixx, overdid exercise and suffered—in his case, dying for it. For others, “exercise [became] a way of life to the point that those who [exercise but] don’t find exercise a panacea for all of life’s woes can become discouraged.”³³

In this new version of Theodore Roosevelt’s “strenuous life,” individuals challenged themselves to discipline their bodies. In contrast to earlier models of healthy bodies at the service of the imperial state, of robust males worthy of dominating the globe, the new worshippers at the shrine of exercise posited their right to dominate economically and socially after a decade of shameless play and criticism of the status quo.³⁴ For many who opposed or avoided combat in the 1960s and 1970s, disciplining the body legitimized their right to join or replace the managerial elite. I suggest that for many, especially middle-class males, their turn to exercise stemmed from the fact that they had not served in the army. Soldiers who left the armed services in the 1940s and 1950s did not heed their leaders call to exercise.³⁵ Those who had not served had something to prove to themselves and their elders. Exercise and discipline of the body, even to the point of mortification of the flesh, demonstrated their virtue and their right to rule. This challenge evoked a response. “Most of the 76 million boomers,” noted *Time* in 1982, “are finished with the drug culture and alternative therapies. Instead, many of them have seized on fitness—ergo, older Americans jog in an attempt not to be pushed aside by an army of fresh, unlined faces running in their wake.”³⁶ Ironically, the individualistic aspects of this movement also appealed to federal authorities, who shifted responsibility for public health back onto the shoulders of each individual.³⁷

Who Were These Exercisers?

These exercisers were originally rooted among (mostly white) “boomers” of the middle and professional classes. “They are the upscale people,” observed *New York Magazine*, “college-educated, those in upper and upper-middle income brackets, professionals, business people, the general

³² Janice Kaplan, “Exercise: The New High,” *Glamour* (May 1978), 250.

³³ Diamond, “Fitness,” 49.

³⁴ On the complexity of issues of masculinity, see R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley, Calif., 1995); Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America* (New York, 1995); and Luciano, *Looking Good*.

³⁵ Eisenman and Barnett, “Physical Fitness in the 1950s and 1970s,” 114-22.

³⁶ Reed, “America Shapes Up,” 98.

³⁷ Gillick, “Health Promotion,” 382-83.

run of white-collar workers.”³⁸ Jane Fonda might have wanted to gear her workouts “toward secretaries,” but classes cost money, and \$5.50 per class was “a lot for someone earning \$165 a week.”³⁹ Many were single, and “in many large cities, the jogging preserve or health club,” *Newsweek* opined in 1977, “has replaced the singles bar as the most popular meet-market.”⁴⁰

Women played an important role in expanding the fitness movement. As early as 1977, observers noted. “perhaps the most salient aspect of shaping up is its new coed character.”⁴¹ Some writers estimated that “60-65 percent of the present fitness movement is represented by women” and that the industry had to understand that market and serve it better.⁴² Women turned to exercise for a variety of reasons. Feminist ideology featuring an attitude of physical strength and fitness understood as a necessary counterpart to increased social empowerment influenced some. With strength, argued one writer, “your need for a man is apt to subside from desperation to something more pleasant and proportionate. So feminism and fitness intersect and reinforce each other.”⁴³

Participation in sports and fitness also increased with the addition of Title IX to the Civil Rights Act and the development of organized women’s sports in secondary schools. Between 1970 and 1980, for example, the number of women in interscholastic sports expanded ten-fold, from under 300,000 to over 3.1 million. Meanwhile, millions of women ran, while as many as 14 million danced for exercise.⁴⁴

Women increasingly deferred marriage and childbearing. They entered the work force and, one club owner noted, this left them with more wealth and independence and more money to spend on items such as “physical exercise which makes them feel and look better, and provides welcome relief from stress”⁴⁵ of all sorts. Similarly, serial monogamy, increased divorce rates, and the rise of a visual culture of the body that featured new “sites of the body” (along with fitness centers) such as sex clubs and discos,

³⁸ Van Doorn, “An Intimidating New Class,” 36; see also Tim Richards, “Size of the Recreation Industry,” *IRSA News* 2 (April 1982): 8. On class aspects of this process, see Pierre Bourdieu, “Sport and Social Class,” *Social Science Information* 17, no. 6 (1978): 819-40; and Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London, 1984), 214; Chris Shilling, “Educating the Body: Physical Capital and the Production of Social Inequalities,” *Sociology* 25, no. 4 (1991): 653-72.

³⁹ Elaine Louie, “The Boom in Health Clubs,” *New York Times Magazine* (7 Oct. 1979), 80.

⁴⁰ Waters, “Keeping Fit,” 81.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Biz Stark, “Women in the Fitness Center,” *ISRA Club Business* 4 (May 1984), 37.

⁴³ Annie Gottlieb, “Getting Strong,” *Mademoiselle* (March 1981), 239.

⁴⁴ Tim Richards, “Women’s Involvement in Fitness and Sports,” part 1, *IRSA News* 2 (April 1982): 11; *IRSA News* 3 (April 1983): 6.

⁴⁵ Richards, “Women’s Involvement in Fitness and Sports,” part 2, *IRSA News* 2 (June 1982): 6.

advertising, mainstream and the newly “legitimized” and widely available pornographic film, and increasingly revealing clothing made care of the body an important element in defining personal attractiveness. This affected both sexes, but it encouraged a new “seriousness” regarding exercise among women.

Fitness was thus a double-edged sword. It contributed to empowering women and, at the same time, committed women to externally created and imposed standards of sexual attractiveness and beauty. It shifted the obligation for maintaining a particular shape entirely onto the individual, challenging some standards (for example, female bodybuilding), and accepting others (the firm, taut, commercial look) without question. If only you ate better and worked out more, the argument went, you would be prettier and more successful in life and, especially, with men, just like the women in the ads and the movies. As Nautilus trainee Ellen Bilgore noted, “the system works.” However, she mused, “I am stronger, though not sure why I need to be strong when what I really want is to be prettier.”⁴⁶ This tension among strength, health, slimness, fitness, and “beauty” remained a constant theme in the gendered development of the fitness movement.⁴⁷

Gyms and exercise salons, as well as dance studios, all attracted women, and the culture increasingly validated this activity. “A beautiful body,” some observed in 1979, was now “one that is well-toned from exercise.”⁴⁸ Long and lean is out, declared a *New York Times Magazine* culture correspondent the following year. “In the past year, bodies have begun to change as a result of new exercise routines and equipment, and the effort spent in gyms—by both men and women—is sure to show at the shore or by the pool.”⁴⁹ A strong, toned body, built consciously to demonstrate control over everything life had both to offer and to throw at you, had emerged along with, if not replaced, the slim, waiflike presentation of beauty of the 1960s and early 1970s. What with inflation, divorce, work, and home demands, “we’ve simply got to be strong,” mused Annie Gottlieb in 1981.⁵⁰ “Vitality! It’s a whole new kind of beauty,” crowed *Mademoiselle* magazine in 1978, “a whole new kind of sex appeal, & there’s a whole new kind of woman—taut, strong, long on energy—ushering it in. . . . The name of the game is sports: exercise that delivers a

⁴⁶ Ellen Bilgore, “Six Weeks in the Life of a Nautilus Trainee,” *Glamour* (Sept. 1980), 223. On bodybuilding, see Leslie Heywood, *Bodymakers: A Cultural Anatomy of Women’s Body Building* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1998).

⁴⁷ For an excellent look at this as it relates to women, weight, and exercise, see Seid, *Never Too Thin*, especially 235-56.

⁴⁸ Beach, “The New Fitness,” 78.

⁴⁹ Alexandra Penney, “Showing Some New Muscle,” *New York Times Magazine* (15 June 1980), 58.

⁵⁰ Gottlieb, “Getting Strong,” 241. On the equation of beauty and slimness see Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*; Kim Chernin, *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York, 1994). For an alternative socio-biological critique of their social constructionism, see Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest*.

lifetime of fitness and fun together, play and interplay that charges you with energy.”⁵¹

It was a new moment when Rosalyn Drexler, an author and competitive power lifter, could proclaim, “I believe that any woman in reasonably good health can double her strength within six months if she wants to. There’s everything to gain and nothing to lose but her prejudice about what a woman should like and be. I say be strong!”⁵² The fit, displayed, gendered body was presented, both consciously and unconsciously, as performance art.⁵³

The New Centers

As the 1970s began, Dr. Kenneth Cooper, author of the bestselling book, *Aerobics*, proclaimed, “. . . in two years, Aerobics has progressed from near obscurity to a worldwide exercise program involving millions” who ran as if their lives depended on it.⁵⁴ The fitness movement also entered America’s hotels, malls, shopping centers, and office parks via fitness centers. By 1978, the well-established club movement led CBS to set a sitcom in a health club.⁵⁵ Modern clubs joined the men’s health clubs, which had existed in most large cities before 1970, serving upper-income males with massage, steam baths, light exercise, and passive exercise machines such as vibrating belts that supposedly broke up fat.⁵⁶

Vic Tanny, a former junior high school social studies teacher from Rochester, New York, began his first “modern” fitness club in Santa Monica, California, in 1940. The company opened dozens more clubs during the late 1950s and early 1960s. By 1962, however, cash shortages forced the firm to pursue franchising and the sale of contracts to collection agencies. When the business folded that year, there were over a hundred Tanny clubs nationwide. They had attempted to move beyond the image of the “low-rent, bare-bones, smoke-and-sweat-saturated hangout for boxers and bodybuilders,” such as Joe Gold’s Gym in Venice, California, and, instead, sought to establish “temples of luxury and respectability” filled “with gleaming chrome equipment” that provided a full-out exercise experience, although “excessive grunting was frowned upon.”⁵⁷ The chain’s

⁵¹ “Fitness Game,” *Mademoiselle* (April 1978), 184.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 268.

⁵³ Gottlieb, “Getting Strong.” For a more thorough feminist philosophical analysis of this phenomenon, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1999).

⁵⁴ Kenneth Cooper, “Key to Fitness at Any Age,” *Readers’ Digest* (March 1970), 215.

⁵⁵ “CBS Television Says Midseason Changes Involve 5 New Shows,” *Wall Street Journal*, 6 Dec. 1978, p. 23. The show, starring Carol Channing, failed.

⁵⁶ Luciano, *Looking Good*, 88-89; Keith Mano, “The Health Clubs,” *National Review* (24 Nov. 1972), 1302-3.

⁵⁷ Luciano, *Looking Good*, 89-90; “Chain Site Hunt Is Intricate Job.” *New York Times* 27 May 1958, p. 53; “Vic Tanny Begins Franchising Moves,” *ibid.*, 25 May

failure did not mean the collapse of the individual clubs. Club managers bought many, and at least twelve went to a duo who, over the years, built their holdings into the industry's largest chain.⁵⁸

Three thousand private fitness clubs in 1978 grew to almost 20,000 by 2002.⁵⁹ Membership skyrocketed from 1.7 million in 1972 to 42.7 million by 2006 (see Fig. 1).⁶⁰ Club sales and receipts climbed from \$227 million in 1972 to almost \$8 billion in 1997.⁶¹

Why did these clubs flourish? In part, they succeeded because people had a desire to be healthy. A nation plagued by heart, lung, and blood vessel disease confronted what commentators—not without justice—dubbed its “inactivity and obesity.”⁶² White-collar or physically undemanding lifestyles meant Americans had to tackle a health regime—or at least parts of it—for themselves. This change partly shifted responsibility for public health back onto the shoulders of each individual.⁶³ Others, of course, just sought to look “good,” or “better,” or “younger.”⁶⁴ Fitness became as much about conforming to a particular image of the healthy body as being healthy, and the clubs played on peoples' insecurities as toned, bulked, pumped, chemically and surgically altered muscularity came to signal health, virtuous masculinity, strength, and a new, toned femininity throughout the commercial media.⁶⁵

1962, p. 51; “Defiance Industries Pays About \$2 Million for Over 30% of BSF,” *Wall Street Journal*, 23 July 1962, p. 9; “BSF Says It Plans Immediate Liquidation of New York Factors,” *ibid.*, 12 Nov. 1962, p. 4. The issue of grunting remains problematic in many clubs today. See Anahad O'Connor, “No Grunting, They Said, and He Was at the Gym,” *New York Times*, 18 Nov. 2006, A1, A15.

⁵⁸ “The Bally Buy-Out,” *IRSA Club Business* 4 (May 1984): 34.

⁵⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Industry Statistics Sampler: NAICS 713940 Fitness and Recreational Sports Centers*, viewed 14 July 2008. URL: <http://www.census.gov/epcd/ec97/industry/E713940.HTM>; “Health Spas: Svelte for Sale,” *Consumer Reports* 43 (Aug. 1978): 440; McCarthy, *IHRSA's Guide*, 2. The *IHRSA's Guide* suggests that there are closer to 22,000 clubs.

⁶⁰ “Health Spas,” *Consumer Reports*, 441; “U.S. Health Club Membership Reaches 42.7 Million in 2006,” 25 April 2007, PRNewswire-USNewswire; viewed 30 April 2008. URL: <http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/stories.pl?ACCT=104&STORY=/www/story/04-25-2007/0004573177&EDATE>.

⁶¹ “Health Spas,” *Consumer Reports*, 441; U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Census Bureau, *Industry Statistics Sampler: NAICS 713940 Fitness and Recreational Sports Centers*. I have not adjusted dollar values. The U.S. Census Bureau, 2002 Economic Fact Sheet suggests that 25,000 fitness facilities had revenues of almost \$15 billion, but these are not easily disaggregated into taxable and tax-exempt gymnasiums such as the Young Men's Christian Association's (YMCAs), Jewish Community Centers, and Boys and Girls Clubs.

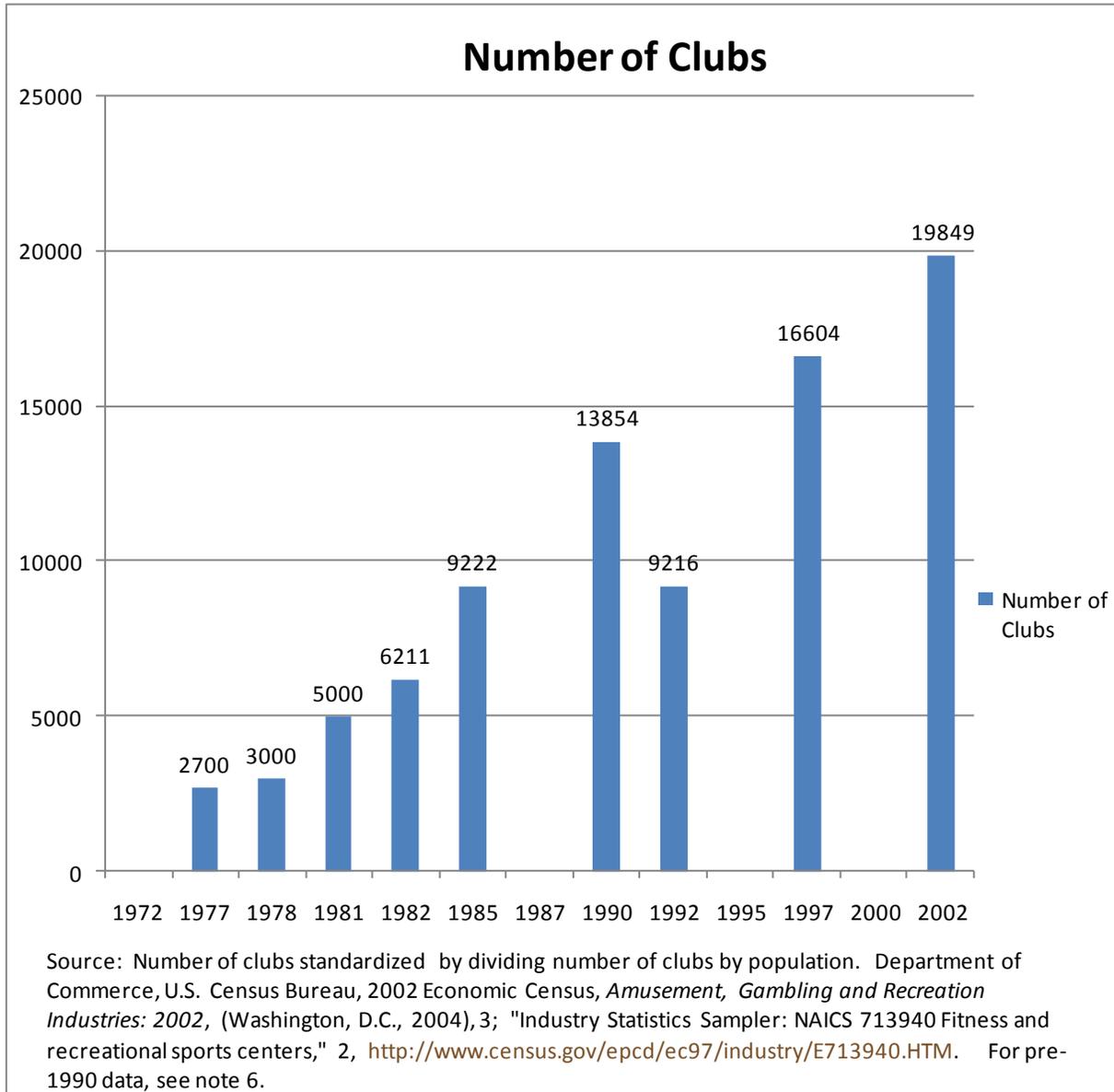
⁶² “Why 60 Million Americans Are on a ‘Fitness Kick’,” *U.S. News and World Report* (14 Jan. 1974), 26.

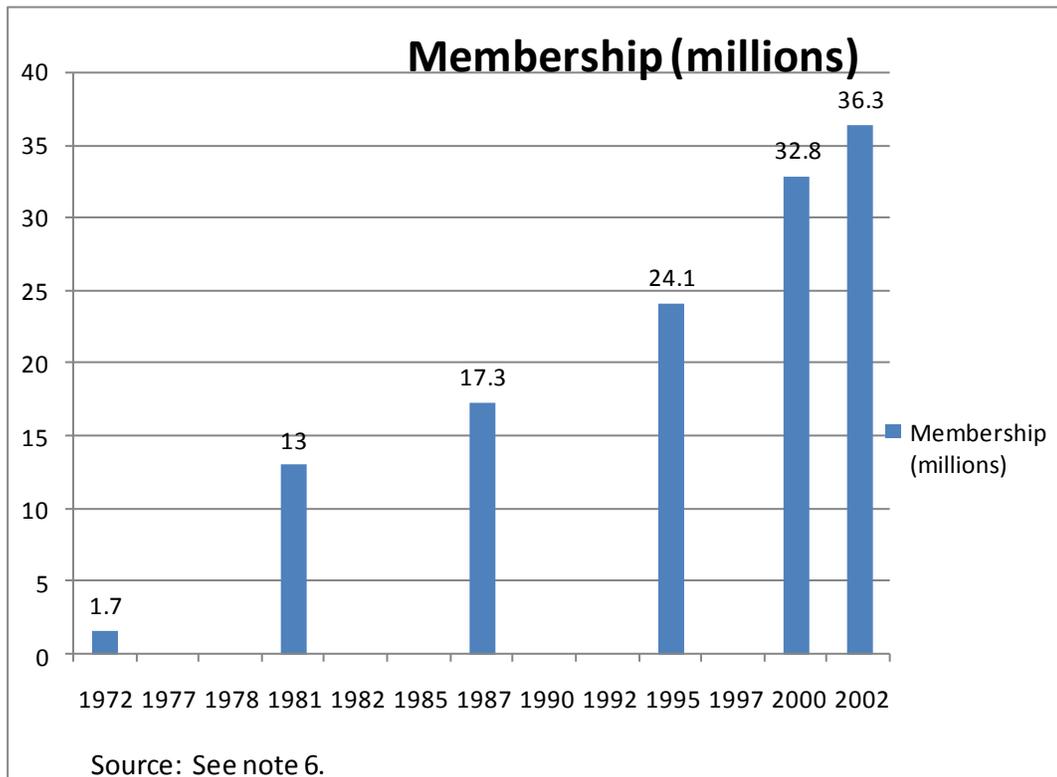
⁶³ Gillick, “Health Promotion,” 382-83.

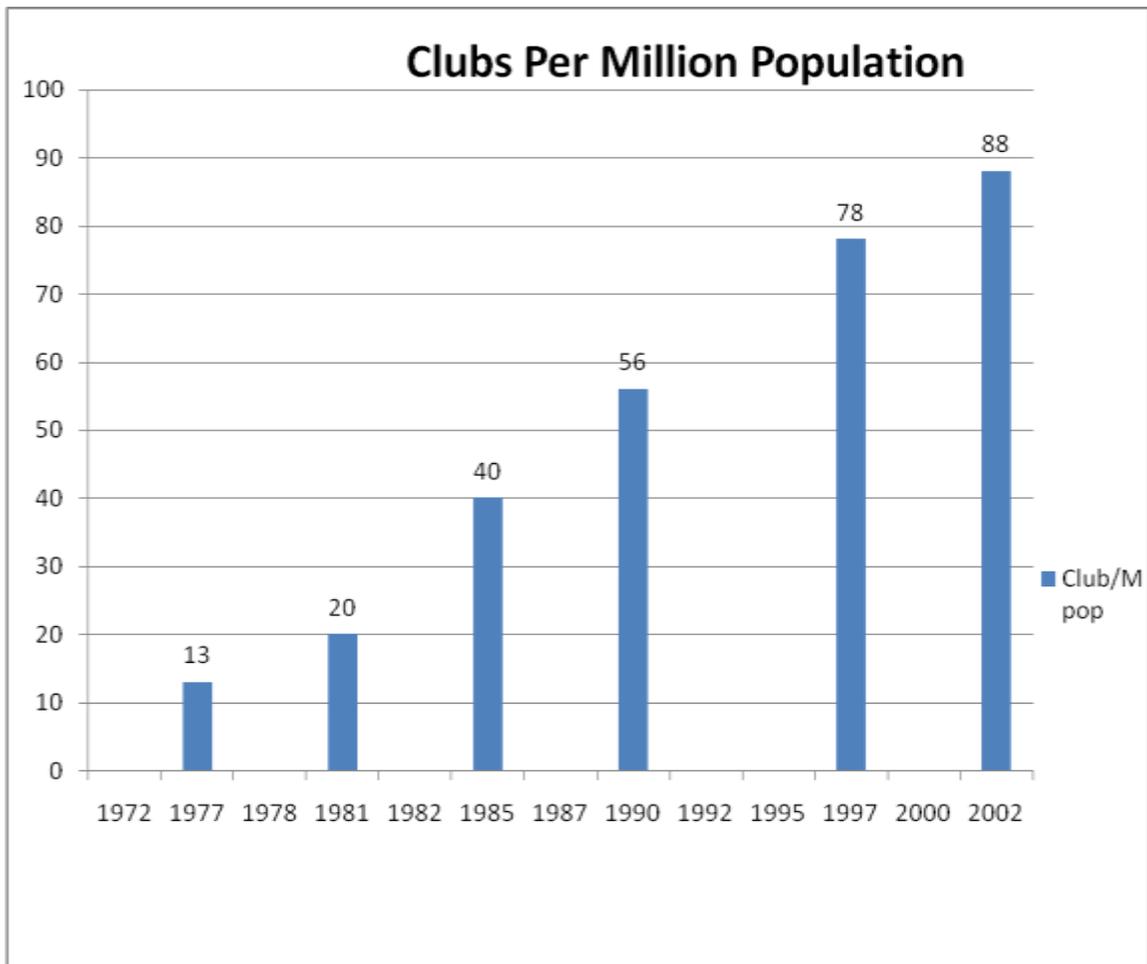
⁶⁴ Guild, “Fitness Forever”; Snider, “Exercise Not Always Beneficial.”

⁶⁵ This aspect of the question will be discussed in other papers.

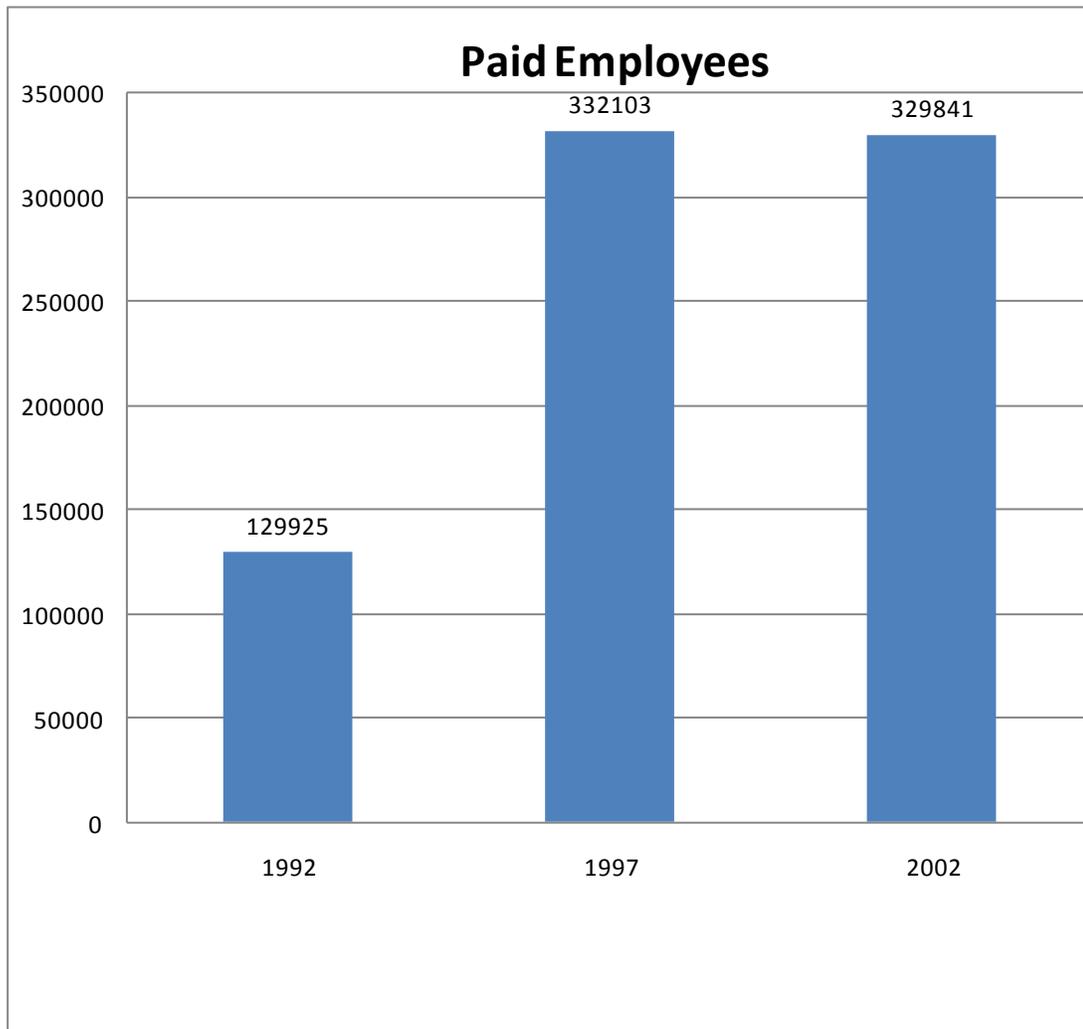
FIGURE 1
Club Data, 1972-2002



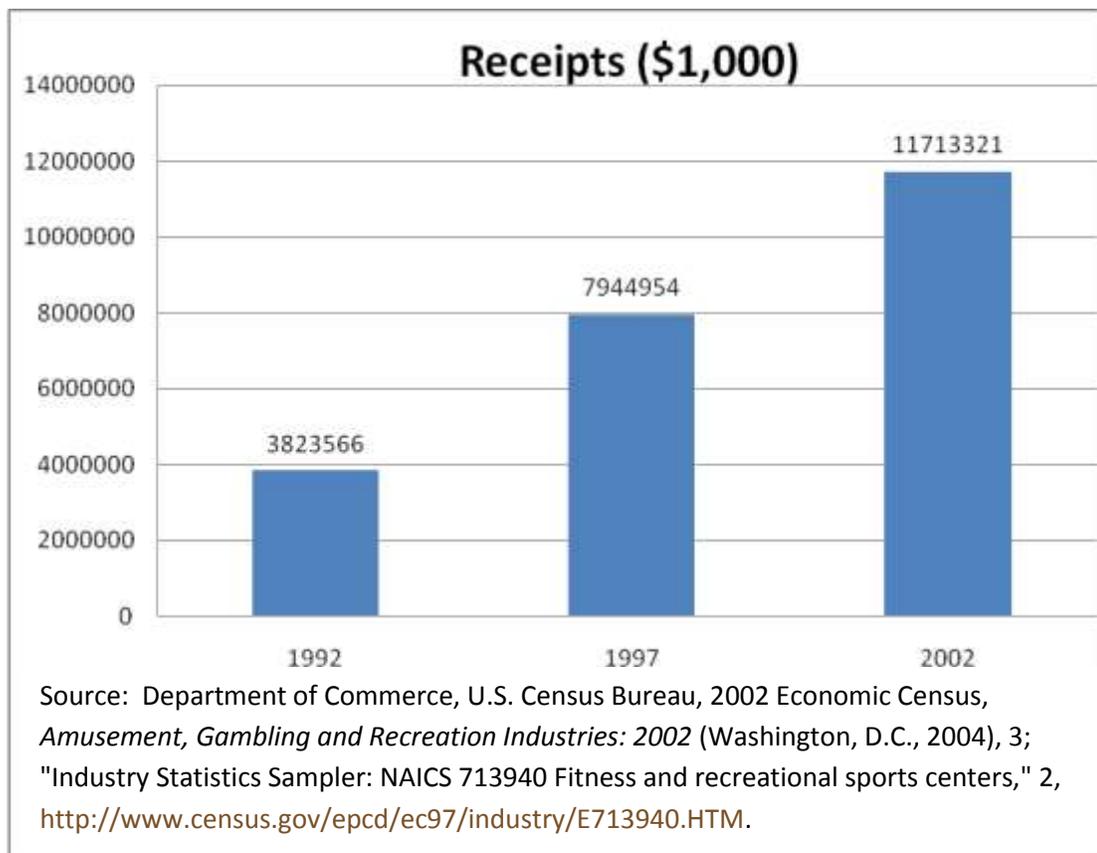




Source: Number of clubs standardized by dividing number of clubs by population. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, 2002 Economic Census, *Amusement, Gambling and Recreation Industries: 2002* (Washington, D.C., 2004), 3; "Industry Statistics Sampler: NAICS 713940 Fitness and recreational sports centers," 2; <http://www.census.gov/epcd/ec97/industry/E713940.HTM>. For pre-1990 data, see note 6.



Source: Department of Commerce, US. Census Bureau, 2002 Economic Census, *Amusement, Gambling and Recreation Industries: 2002* (Washington, D.C., 2004), 3; "Industry Statistics Sampler: NAICS 713940 Fitness and recreational sports centers," 2; <http://www.census.gov/epcd/ec97/industry/E713940.HTM>. For pre-1990 data, see note 6.



Why a club? For hard-core exercisers, clubs enabled exercise in all weather conditions.⁶⁶ Ritzier clubs pampered patrons, and all provided more workout options than individuals could manage on their own. That much is obvious. For many, however, the club was more than a second-best alternative to outdoor exercise. "Part of the appeal and actual value of a health club, it seems," remarked journalists in *Today's Health* in 1972, "is as much psychological as physical."⁶⁷

Joining reassured members that they were serious about working out and let them feel socially connected. It allowed them to feel virtuous and know that others were observing them being virtuous. Viewing and voyeurism were an active part of the exercise scene.⁶⁸ One watched what

⁶⁶ Jane Brody, "Personal Health," *New York Times*, 15 Feb. 1984, C10.

⁶⁷ Joanne Koch and Susan Petrillo, "What You'd Better Know before Joining a Health Club," *Today's Health* (Feb. 1972), 67.

⁶⁸ Issues of watching are an important element in almost every discussion of the gyms. This is not simply sexual or heterosexual. It includes women watching women, and men watching men, in both sexual and non-sexual comparative fashion. See, in particular, Sabol, *The Body of America*; "The Beauty of Fitness." *Mademoiselle* 84 (Aug. 1978), 218-25; Shari L. Dworkin, "A Woman's Place is in

others did, what they looked like, and what they wore. Gym mirrors allowed patrons to watch others and to be watched in return. The gym was the realization of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, an unrealized prison where prisoners sat in their cells never sure when the central scrutinizer was observing them. As Michel Foucault noted in *Discipline and Punish*, this represented a new level of historical control over the resistant body (both social and individual), where the possibility of observation altered the prisoner's behavior just as the factory later transformed the worker's behavior.⁶⁹ I hypothesize that the longing for validation helped drive the exercisers to greater efforts in this panopticon of self-imposed discipline and punishment, where public pain was gain in both the physical and psychological sense.⁷⁰ The prisoners were also guards.

Gyms quickly added machines to capture an expanded coed market. Within eleven years of their introduction in 1970, over 2,600 Nautilus centers served over 2.2 million U.S. users. Their popularity grew as athletes used them for strength training.⁷¹ Nautilus equipment and its competitors became both ubiquitous and increasingly sophisticated. Microprocessors, computerized readouts, multiple workout programs, and other innovations helped to "revolutionize multipurpose resistance

the . . . Cardiovascular Room?? Gender Relations, the Body, and the Gym," in *Athletic Intruders: Ethnographic Research on Women, Culture, and Exercise*, ed. Anne Bolin and Jane Granskog (Albany, N.Y., 2003), 131-58; Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power" in *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*, ed. Rose Weitz (New York, 2003), 25-45; Pirkko Markula, "Postmodern Aerobics: Contradiction and Resistance," in *Athletic Intruders*, ed. Bolin and Granskog; Glassner, *Bodies*.

⁶⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1979).

⁷⁰ Tina B. Eskes, Margaret Carlisle Duncan, and Eleanor M. Miller, "The Discourse of Empowerment: Foucault, Marcuse, and Women's Fitness Texts," *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 22, no. 3 (Aug. 1998): 317-44; Moya Lloyd, "Feminism, Aerobics, and the Politics of the Body," *Body and Society* 2, no. 2 (1996): 79-98; Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power."

⁷¹ Starkman, "Converting the Cult of High-Tech Fitness," 54. Sixty thousand more users lived in Canada. The machinery itself resided "in approximately 4,000 health and fitness centers around the country, and more medical, therapeutic, and sports facilities." Daniel Shannon, "The Man from Nautilus," *New York Times*, 25 July 1982, F7. A cam and pulley system, Nautilus was designed by Arthur Jones, who began producing his machines in 1970. Gerald Eskenazi, "Miss Navratalova: 'I Feel I Can Do Anything' . . .," *New York Times*, 3 March 1978, A17; "The Case for Nautilus: 'Full Range' Exercise," *ibid.*, 10 July 1978, C10; Robin Herman, "Apples' Mrs. King Health for Playoff Opener Tonight," *ibid.*, 16 Aug. 1977, p. 55; P. Ranganath Nayak and John M. Ketteringham, *Breakthroughs!* (New York, 1986), 276; Steve Cady, "Yanks Get a Leg Up on Season," *New York Times*, 24 March 1978, A17.

devices.”⁷² By 1988, noted the *New York Times*, gyms were increasingly like “video arcades.”⁷³

In addition to the facilities, clubs provided the social solidarity that made doing something as painful and boring as exercise more bearable. The social bonding was palpable. “At home,” one member remarked in 1978, “I’d miss the camaraderie that develops in a group and the ideas and information on health that I glean.”⁷⁴ It was hard enough to start exercising; sustaining it required social reinforcement and the right environment.⁷⁵ Many club-goers also sought a social environment for meeting like-minded individuals and appropriate partners.⁷⁶ Clubs with restaurants, juice bars, lounges, and planned social events expanded their role in members’ lives during the 1980s.⁷⁷ That element of club culture seems to have shifted somewhat during the 1990s. Although “looking to meet Ms. or Mr. Right-Now” still mattered for some, gyms increasingly served people attempting to develop or maintain their health or “look.”⁷⁸ In some ways, the move from form-fitting lycra and spandex leotards, shorts, and muscle shirts in the 1980s, where members were, as the *Wall Street Journal* observed in 1986, “more interested in style than sweat,” to comfortable, less revealing shorts, sweatpants, t-shirts and sweatshirts embodied that shift.⁷⁹

“In a good gym or health club,” wrote fitness commentator Alexandra Penney, “a quiet pervasive atmosphere tells you that what’s being done there is important. . . . There’s usually a friendly and helpful spirit around gyms.”⁸⁰ In good facilities, instructors helped newcomers engage, taught them how to use the equipment, and helped them exercise properly (as understood at any given moment). This was crucial, as exercising could be dangerous. But, as one public health scholar noted in 1972, “there’s no government supervision of exercise classes or the people who run them; no government approved standardized training schools for exercise

⁷² “Life Cycle,” *Popular Mechanics* (May 1982), 36.

⁷³ Linda Wells, “Exercising Options,” *New York Times*, 21 Aug. 1988, SMA70.

⁷⁴ “How to Select a Health Club,” *Business Week* (18 Sept. 1978), 170; see also J. Main, “Keeping Fit without Getting Trimmed,” *Money* 7 (Sept. 1978): 61.

⁷⁵ Michael deCourcy Hinds, “Where to Shape Up in Manhattan: A Guide to Health Clubs,” *New York Times*, 24 May 1980, p. 48.

⁷⁶ Reed, “America Shapes Up,” 103.

⁷⁷ Robert Lindsey, “Health Clubs Thrive as Meeting Places for Young Single People,” *New York Times*, 4 Dec. 1981, A18; B. B. Lynch, “The New Wave in Health Clubs,” *New York Times*, 13 Nov. 1983, F4; Bill Richards, “Misshapen Identities,” *Wall Street Journal*, 21 April 1986, W55.

⁷⁸ Jennifer Steinhauer, “90’s Anthem: So Many Gyms, So Little Time,” *New York Times*, 1 Jan. 1995, p. 41. Some gyms remained committed to a meat/meet market mentality where “voyeurism is encouraged and looking great expected.” *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷⁹ Richards, “Misshapen Identities”; Molly O’Neill, “From Work to Workout,” *New York Times*, 22 Aug. 1993, p. 259.

⁸⁰ Alexandra Penney, “Health Clubs,” *Working Woman* (May 1980), 100.

teachers—as there are in many European countries.”⁸¹ Voluntary certification and in-house training was more common by 1990, but mandatory certification eluded the cautious consumer and *caveat emptor* ruled.⁸² The practice of using floor staff as salespeople often meant that instructors paid much more attention to prospective commissions than to exercising members.⁸³

In general, two types of clubs emerged during the 1970s. The first, geared initially around racquet sports, followed on the country club. They relied on user fees, higher monthly charges, and an initiation fee. They sought high retention by providing full-service clubs. Their trade associations came together in the International Racquet Sport Association (IRSA), self-declared “The Association for Quality Clubs,” in 1981.⁸⁴ They competed with chain and stand-alone fitness centers and lobbied aggressively against untaxed not-for-profits such as the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association), Jewish Community Centers, and so forth, which built state-of-the-art facilities providing services at rates below those the for-profit, taxed clubs could match.⁸⁵ Circuit training, aerobic dance, and individual workouts in fitness clubs of various sorts grew in the late 1970s at the expense of alternative operations. Racquet sports (which grew in the early and mid-1970s) declined, with participation and sales falling 25 percent in 1981 alone, as people began “working out.”⁸⁶

⁸¹ Dawn Huesties, New York University Medical Center, cited in Lydia McClean, “Exercise: What You Don’t Know Can Hurt You,” *Vogue* (Oct. 1972), 145.

⁸² Arlene Schulman. “Training Programs for the Instructor,” *New York Times*, 17 Sept. 1990, C12; Suzanne Hildreth, “The ACSM Seal of Approval: Who’s Fit to Teach Fitness,” *IRSA Club Business* 8 (June 1987): 72-75. The most prominent certification source was the College of Sports Medicine. The International Foundation for Exercise and Dance and the Aerobics Fitness Association also certified instructor skills.

⁸³ Even Touche Ross & Co. noted in an evaluation of the industry “that the largest part of their effort is the sales effort, and that the operation of the spa is only ancillary to the sales program.” “Health Spas,” *Consumer Reports*, 441; Geoff Hampton, “Secrets of Membership Sales,” *IRSA News* 3 (April 1983): 10; “High Pressure, Low Service: Memoirs of a Former Storefront Salesperson,” *IRSA Club Business* 6 (May 1985): 22-23.

⁸⁴ Suzanne Hildreth, “IRSA: The Evolution,” *Club Business International* 12 (March 1991): 81.

⁸⁵ YMCA expansion via elite institutions is a constant refrain in IRSA publications throughout the 1980s. Many others agreed, arguing that the YMCA “economically discriminates against almost everyone. . . . Predominantly black and poor residents are paying for athletic facilities for the rich, white suburbanites who don’t pay taxes in the city.” Other YMCAs, including the one in Boston, consciously rejected this trend, remained simpler and less fancy, and sought to serve all, regardless of their wealth; see Karen de Witt, *New York Times*, 21 April 1979, p. 20.

⁸⁶ John S. Lang, “America’s Fitness Binge,” *U.S. News & World Report* (May 1982), 58-61. The multipurpose sports clubs that survived in this environment were those that transitioned successfully from racquet sports to fitness. By 1983,

The “storefront” center represented the industry’s other pole. Located in shopping malls, hotels, and so forth, these included many serious clubs with competent instructors and a focus on low-cost, high-volume service. Others were fraudulent or simply incompetent. Consumer groups filed protest after protest about every aspect of club practices, and the Federal Trade Commission considered regulating the industry, widely regarded as one of America’s most problematic. It began investigating the clubs in 1979, only to abandon the idea of controls during the anti-regulatory years of Ronald Reagan’s administration.⁸⁷

IRSA insiders were suggesting a name change that would match the new focus on fitness (for example, Nautilus/circuit training, aerobic dance, etc.) that had already swept through the clubs. Tim Richards, “IRSA’s Annual Industry Data Study,” *IRSA News* 3 (March 1983): 14. That change would not occur until 1994, when IRSA became the International Health, Racquet, and Sportclub Association (IHRSA), but the concern for fitness as opposed to racquet sports became a primary factor in maintaining membership and in growing, as evidenced in every IRSA trade journal from 1981 onward.

⁸⁷ These included: hard sell practices including humiliation and psychological abuse of vulnerable individuals, false advertising about likely results, as well as prices and sales, incomplete contracts, unsanitary locker rooms and gym conditions, lifetime memberships that disappeared with the club, not letting people read contracts overnight before they sign them, not filling in prices on the contracts, memberships sold for clubs that never opened, clubs’ refusals to honor stated member reciprocity agreements, lawsuits collecting payments on clubs that had closed, and refunds refused when members moved out of an area, became ill, or even died. Suffolk County, New York, for example, logged over a thousand consumer complaints about health club behavior in just four years. “Health Spas,” *Consumer Reports*, 440-44; “Vic Tanny Gyms Sign Fair-Practice Code” *New York Times*, 2 July 1960, p. 20; Thomas Buckley, “State Acts to Bar Tanny Debt Suits,” *ibid.*, 17 Dec. 1963, p. 41; “The Federal Trade Commission’s Report on the Health Spa Industry,” *IRSA Club Business* 6 (July 1985): 45-46; Stan Crock and Burt Schorr, “FTC Stirs Up a Vast Array of Opponents, and Congress Weighs Curb on Its Power,” *Wall Street Journal*, 18 Oct. 1979, p. 48; Grace Lichtenstein, “Installment Customers Tell Hearings of Bilkings,” *New York Times*, 8 June 1971, p. 41. On sanitation and the clubs, see Ronald Sullivan, “Health Clubs Shut for Violations,” *New York Times*, 25 Aug. 1982, B22; Federal regulators at the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) sought to regulate the trade as early as the late 1970s. See “FTC Aide Urges Rules to Discourage Abuses Laid to Health Spas,” *Wall Street Journal*, 2 May 1979, p. 5. The industry took the FTC’s decision and report as suggesting that “basically, the Federal Trade Commission’s study found that the health club industry was fairly well regulated, both at the state and local level and within the industry itself.” “The Federal Trade Commission’s Report on the Health Spa Industry,” 46. Storefront fitness centers united to oppose these “intrusions” through their Association of Physical Fitness Centers, a trade group founded in 1974 by a University of Maryland associate professor of business administration, Jimmy Johnson. Craig R. Waters, “The Champ: Dr. Jimmy D. Johnson, President of the AFPC, Fighting for Clubs,” *IRSA Club Business* 9 (Jan. 1988): 29-36.

Some states stepped in to regulate the industry, Maryland going so far as to establish a “health-spa commissioner,” but problems persisted. Requiring as little as \$100,000 to lease equipment and space, health clubs were an easy way for nefarious operators to bilk the public; the weak business skills of many operators—more athletes than business people—exacerbated the problems.⁸⁸ Dissatisfaction with service along with lack of use (one estimate suggested that the storefronts, including the largest chains, averaged 55 visits per member in 1986—up from 24 in 1983—compared to 120 for IRSA clubs) led to average annual membership turnover rates of 40-60 percent. Although some elite clubs managed turnover as low as 2 percent, even good clubs spoke of 35 percent fallout; storefronts actually relied on dropouts to keep attendance manageable, while maintaining cash flows through new memberships and high initiation fees. Where the “bleed” did not occur, dissatisfaction rates rose as high as 80 percent.⁸⁹ For all their failings, storefronts expanded during the 1970s and 1980s and held the largest share of all club members. Advertising constituted an enormous portion of the chains’ budgets, and paid celebrity spokespeople such as Cher (who worked out in her private gym at home) or Arnold Schwarzenegger (intimately connected to Joe Gold’s World Gym, a franchise founded after Gold’s Gym was sold in 1970)

⁸⁸ The states took to banning lifetime contracts, and introduced three-day cooling off periods guaranteeing new members full refunds within 72 hours of contract signing and conditions for pro-rated refunds, including moves out of area, relocation of the gym, and illness, injury, or death. They attempted to control exploitative sales practices based on psychological abuse of vulnerable clients. They also required that new clubs post bonds vulnerable to forfeit in the event of abuse. Industry leaders often objected to these controls as inappropriate regulation designed to stifle entrepreneurship and punishing smaller clubs, but such rules spread to over twenty-seven states by 1987, up from seventeen in 1983. See Richard B. Schmitt, “Fiscal Fitness; Efforts to Regulate Health Clubs Fail to End Abuses,” *Wall Street Journal*, 3 April 1987, p. 33; “The Federal Trade Commission’s Report on the Health Spa Industry,” 45-46; Waters, “The Champ: Dr. Jimmy D. Johnson,” 29-36. New York State, for example, passed legislation mandating particular refund policies and contract length in 1978: “A Summary of the Actions Taken This Year by the New York State Legislature,” *New York Times*, 31 July 1978, A12.

⁸⁹ William R. Greer, “Finding the Right Health Club,” *New York Times*, 15 March 1986, GH102; R. B. Lynch, “The New Wave in Health Clubs,” *ibid.*, 13 Nov. 1983, F4; “Health Spas,” *Consumer Reports*, 442; “The Bally Buy-Out,” *IRSA Club Business* 4 (May 1984): 34; Suzanne Hildreth, “Why the Storefront Myth Won’t Work,” *IRSA Club Business* 8 (July 1987): 34-39; Grace Lichtenstein, “Installation Customers Tell Hearings of Bilkings,” *New York Times*, 8 June 1971, p. 41. For an interesting look at one high-pressure experience, see Margaret Roach, “A Few Good Places to Get in Shape,” *ibid.*, 10 July 1978, C10. Hinds cited the FTC report, which also includes an impressive look at high-pressure tactics and conditions in clubs in New York. On the rate of visits per member, see Hildreth, “Why the Storefront Myth Won’t Work,” 35-36.

brought both aspiring “hardbodies” and normal individuals desperate to reshape their bodies and self-image into the clubs.⁹⁰

The demand for a place to work out carried both IRSA and storefront clubs forward. Between 1972 and 1978 alone, membership in these clubs rose from 1.7 to 13 million, reaching 17.3 million by 1987, and 24.1 million by 1995. The number of such clubs rose during the period from 2,700 in 1977 to 9,222 by 1985. Dips in the late 1980s and early 1990s brought those numbers down, but they rebounded after 1992, and the 1990s produced sustained growth.⁹¹

Many of the clubs were owned and managed by a local fitness advocate, athlete, or bodybuilder, someone who wanted a church in which to “preach” the gospel of fitness, to turn passion into a livelihood. Some of these were independent, stand-alone organizations.⁹² Others were clubs connected to larger networks of fitness corporations, either as facilities owned by the firms (for example, Bally’s) or franchise operations, such as Gold’s Gym. Managers often owned shares of Bally’s clubs, providing a proprietary interest in their success. Bally’s immediately set to work to “cut overhead” through computerization of tasks and to “attack the tedium of exercising” via video resources. The corporation determined to “drive mom and pop exercise classes to the wall” and, like other renowned chains such as Gold’s and World Gym, began marketing their own lines of workout clothes, health foods, and supplements. According to a 1988

⁹⁰ Bruce Weber, “Cher’s Next Act,” *New York Times*, 18 Oct. 1987, p. 321 and passim; Catherine S. Masnegold, “Groan Heaven,” *New York Times*, 26 July 1992, p. 262. Advertising costs constituted 31% of revenue for “contract-based facilities”; see Hildreth, “Why the Storefront Myth Won’t Work,” 35.

⁹¹ McCarthy, *IHRSA’s Guide*, 2, 4, 6. Pre-1982 numbers were pieced together from a wide variety of sources. On the dip, see Pereira, “The Exercise Boom Loses Its Strength”; James Hirsch, “Fitness Industry: Shaping Up and Shaking Out,” *New York Times*, 26 Nov. 1988, p. 48.

⁹² As early as 1983, for example, Greg Buttle of the New York Jets opened a gym on Long Island that became one of the best respected in the region. Gerald Eskenazi, “About Long Island,” *New York Times*, 6 Nov. 1983, LI2. IRSA members often noted that expanding from one to several clubs in a chain often took the pleasure out of the enterprise. They were, after all, in it because “they love sports and working out”; John McCarthy, “Club Ownership: Mega-Club or Multi-Club?” *IRSA News* 3 (May 1983): 1. An excellent example of the jock phenomenon was Neil’s Nautilus, originally Neil’s Gym, on Long Island, begun and run by bodybuilder Neil Deitrichson. This was the first gym I ever joined; see Philip Singeman, “Body Works,” *Sport* 69 (Dec. 1979): 85. Many found it difficult to manage the business aspect of their passion, and by 1984 IRSA’s John McCarthy could warn association members that theirs were no longer amateur operations. They now needed “a professional club manager” and full- or part-time department managers; see John McCarthy, “Megatrends in the Club Business,” *IRSA Club Business* 4 (Oct. 1984): 45.

article in the *New York Times*, 80 percent of their income came from the sale of such “soft products.”⁹³

Consolidations, expansions, failures, and shifts in industry structure continued throughout the 1990s. By 1998, reported the *New York Times*, the industry remained very fragmented, with two-thirds of all clubs still stand-alones, although this was down sharply from 1984, when IRSA surveys suggested that nine in ten were solo operations. The industry, although still not “mature” and stable, was consolidating rapidly.⁹⁴ New players such as the Atlanta-based Crunch entered the market, also passing under Bally’s control in 2001.⁹⁵ The women-only Curves Fitness opened its first club in 1992, began franchising in 1995, and claimed over nine thousand franchise operations by 2002.⁹⁶ Turnover was high, and many local chains and stand-alone clubs faced extinction. With investment money pouring into the market and larger national and regional chains growing, many owners sold out, in part, “because it was getting harder to compete for employees and to keep updating equipment.” Clubs marketed themselves aggressively, and only the largest could afford the budgets involved in that sort of warfare. Still, the only two chains publicly traded

⁹³ By the early 1980s, for example, the dozen Vic Tanny’s purchased in 1962 by club managers Don Wildman and Ray Zurkowski had grown into “the largest chain of health clubs in the world,” with 288 fitness centers marketed under a wide range of names, including Tanny and LaLane, when they sold half the stock in their Health and Tennis Corporation of America to Bally Manufacturing. Their acquisition probably saved Bally’s when the video arcade market deteriorated. Lang, “America’s Fitness Binge”; “The Bally Buy-Out,” 34; James Hirsch, “Still Sweating, but in Nicer Clothes,” *New York Times*, 16 Nov. 1988, p. 20; Steven Greenhouse, “Bally Diversification Pays Off,” *ibid.*, 15 March 1985, D1 and *passim*. Bally’s continued to extend its position by taking over other chains, including the second largest, U.S. Health, Inc., in 1988; see Daniel Cuff, “Founder of U.S. Health Sells Out for \$28 Million,” *ibid.*, 21 Oct. 1988, D3. Ironically, Bally’s soon found itself facing a suit for past discriminatory acts by U.S. Health that, the suit said, attempted to exclude African-American members, telling their managers that particular branches were “too dark”; see Jill Abramson and Wade Lambert, “Bally Unit’s Spas Face New Bias Charges,” *Wall Street Journal*, 14 Nov. 1989, B5; “Ads Seek Victims of Discrimination at Spas,” *New York Times*, 11 Nov. 1990, p. 24. Earlier in the decade, U.S. Industries, Inc., sold 80% of its ownership of 131 European Health Spas in order to raise cash; see Raymond A. Joseph, “U.S. Industries to Sell Fitness Unit to New Holding Firm,” *ibid.*, 1 July 1981, p. 6. They were later accused of illegal dealings in this transfer; see “U.S. Industries Is Sued for \$100 Million in Sale of Health Spa Interest,” *ibid.*, 3 May 1982, p. 39.

⁹⁴ Terry Pristin, Health Clubs Consolidate as Membership Grows,” *New York Times*, 16 April 1998, p. 35.

⁹⁵ Jerry Janda, “Bally’s Acquires Crunch Fitness,” *Club Industry’s Fitness Business Pro*, 1 Dec. 2001, viewed 1 Oct. 2007. URL: http://fitnessbusinesspro.com/mag/fitness_bally_acquires_crunch/.

⁹⁶ See Curves, Inc. website; viewed 1 Oct. 2007. URL: http://www.curves.com/about_curves/curves_story.php.

were Bally's (now spun off from its original parent manufacturer into Bally's Total Fitness) and Sports Club.⁹⁷

Both the upscale and mass market-oriented clubs had to deal with issues such as gender and bodybuilding. Many of the 1960s clubs were male-only, and coed venues often featured different days for men and women.⁹⁸ For women only (FWO) clubs began in the 1960s, even as sex segregation started breaking down. In 1969, for example, health devotee and fitness participant Lucille Roberts opened her first all-women's Lucille Roberts Health Club opposite Macy's on 34th St. in New York City. Over time, the firm grew to include fifty clubs by that name.⁹⁹ The Woman's World Health Spa in New England began in 1974 and, by 1979, claimed fifty-five franchise holders. As Elaine Louie observed in the *New York Times Magazine*, all women's health clubs "are perhaps another area of women's liberation. In an athletic sense, they are another version of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*."¹⁰⁰ Large women, in particular, found FWO gyms more comfortable.¹⁰¹ If FWO clubs grew from an emergent feminist consciousness and the rise of a Title IX culture, they also emerged from a desire of many women to have a workout divorced from the sexual overtones of many coed clubs.¹⁰² FWO clubs took a back seat to growth during the 1980s, only to make a comeback by the end of the decade. As many as 67 percent of women surveyed in one study claimed they would prefer a same-sex workout site, and many club owners

⁹⁷ Terry Pristin, "Health Clubs Consolidate as Membership Grows," *New York Times*, 16 April 1998, p. 35; "Bally Plans to Spin Off Health Club Operations," *ibid.*, 18 May 1994, D4.

⁹⁸ Exercise salons in the Elaine Power, Gloria Stevens, and Gloria Marshall chains were often more day spas and beauty centers than fitness clubs; see Suzanne Hildreth, "Move Over Men! F.W.O. Clubs Are Suddenly More Hip (And More Profitable) Than Ever Before," *Club Business International* 10 (April 1989): 26.

⁹⁹<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C01EFDD103CF93BA25754CoA9659C8B63&n=Top/Reference/Times%20Topics/Subjects/E/Exercise>:

Douglas Martin, "Lucille Roberts, 59, Founder of Fitness Chain for Women," Obituary, *New York Times*, 19 July 2003. Site visited 23 July 2008.

¹⁰⁰ Louie, "The Boom in Health Clubs," 80. Each franchise cost \$65,000. Thirty were sold in 1979 alone. "About 1,200 women visit each spa every week, and the owner makes back his purchase price in three to six months."

¹⁰¹ Deborah Blumenthal, "An Exercise Program for the Heavy Woman," *New York Times*, 28 Jan. 1984, p. 16.

¹⁰² "I like an all-female atmosphere," remarked writer and critic Blaire Sabol in 1981, "because I can come and go looking like a perspiring meatball without having to worry about some gorgeous accountant standing at the juice bar." But she also acknowledged that in serious gyms rather than meat markets, men and women usually focused on their workouts, not the bodies of those working out next to them: "hard to believe, but that's how serious the sweat set of the '80s takes their exercise." For many exercisers, both male and female, "our gyms are our temples—sweating is our prayer. At least in these places of worship, cursing is allowed . . . but PLEASE, no smoking"; Blaire Sabol, "Body Talk," *Mademoiselle* (Oct. 1981), 64.

noted that these goals were especially important among older and married women.¹⁰³ A common phenomenon in Los Angeles and Boston, they cropped up in New York during the 1990s, offering a calmer, less frenetic, and quieter environment than their coed counterparts. The demand for privacy also led half of the over five hundred Gold's Gym franchises to establish women-only areas.¹⁰⁴

Clubs had to define their market niches, one element of which was how to relate to bodybuilding. Some clubs actively refused to incorporate serious weightlifting and bodybuilding into their exercise mix. As one Nautilus club owner remarked, "I don't want a muscle gym with a bunch of apes smelling up the place and whistling at the women."¹⁰⁵

Others took the opposite tack. Prestige muscle clubs such as the original Gold's Gym or World Gym in California grew based on their association with premiere bodybuilders, and they parlayed their renown into expansion and franchising in the late 1970s and 1980s.¹⁰⁶ With that came a vast market in logo-based clothing and gym supplement sales, personal training, shows, and so on, that flourished along with Joe Weider's bodybuilding empire (his competitive yet monopolistic International Federation of Body Builders), supplement business, and fitness publications. In those gyms, bodybuilding preceded the arrival of a large general club membership, although the latter subsidized the former by the 1980s.¹⁰⁷ By the late 1980s, many general interest clubs welcomed bodybuilders, although they often had a special "heavy room" for bigger, more aggressive lifters.¹⁰⁸ Women weightlifters and bodybuilders, an oddity when first presented in *Pumping Iron II (The Women)*, made up an increasingly important part of that market.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ Hildreth, "Move Over Men"; Hildreth, "The Women-Only Market," *IRSA Club Business International* 11 (March 1990): 103-12.

¹⁰⁴ Nancy Stedman, "Getting Far, Far From the Macho Crowd," *New York Times*, 2 March 1997, p. 40. None of the sources I have looked at thus far discusses the emergence of the women-only fitness clubs in terms of the rise of lesbian consciousness.

¹⁰⁵ Eric Starkman, "Converting to the Cult of High-Tech Fitness," *Maclean's* 94 (26 Oct. 1981): 54.

¹⁰⁶ Bodybuilder comments could make or break a gym. "Joe Gold's Gym," later Gold's Gym, sued Arnold Schwarzenegger for \$3 million in 1978 for making disparaging comments about their establishment versus Gold's new World Gym. *New York Times*, 25 March 1978, p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ See, especially, Klein, *Little Big Men*.

¹⁰⁸ Richard E. Strock, "Get Serious! . . .with Your Serious Lifters," *IRSA Club Business International* 10 (April 1989): 55.

¹⁰⁹ See Klein, *Little Big Men*; and for a wonderful first-person discussion of bodybuilding and steroid use see Samuel Wilson Fussell, *Muscle: Confessions of an Unlikely Bodybuilder* (New York, 1991); see also John M. Hoberman, *Mortal Engines: The Science of Performance and the Dehumanization of Sport* (New York, 1992). On women bodybuilders, see, among others, Anne Balsamo, "Feminist Bodybuilding," in *Women, Sport, and Culture*, ed. Susan Birrell and

Conclusion

What can we make of the rise of the fitness faith and its churches, the fitness centers? They were a response to crises in both health and identity. Drawing on a new clientele, the fitness movement simultaneously appealed to both individualism and conformity among men and women of all sexual orientations. It both challenged and confirmed preconceived visions of manliness and femininity. It permitted those who had previously resisted the corporation state to make peace with the broader society and to assert their right to rule.

Moreover, the movement was real, as its sustained development indicates. Thousands of fitness businesses, from small storefronts to large multi-purpose clubs, from women-only bastions to muscle gyms, dot the landscape.¹¹⁰ Although stand-alone clubs still dominated the industry numerically, by the twentieth century's end, large, centrally owned, or franchised chains quickly transformed the industry and, by the last decade of the century, showed signs of forming a Chandlerian core, as opposed to a peripheral, industry.¹¹¹ It thrived in an environment that rewarded collective individualism, an environment where the labor of public exercise confirmed individual virtue. It relied heavily on shifting gender relations and the new interest of many women as well as men in developing a "fit," toned, or healthy body.

Finally, to the extent that fitness centers focus on health and respond to individuals attempting to create a better sense of themselves, they serve a positive and vital need. To the extent that they focus on profits before people and prey on insecurities and the need to chase commercially constructed images of beauty masquerading as fitness in a hyper-competitive, zero-sum, winner-take-all environment where security is an increasingly evanescent mirage, they contribute to a decline in human happiness and self-esteem.

Cheryl L. Cole (Champagne, Ill., 1994), 341-52; Anne Bolin, "Beauty or the Beast: The Subversive Soma," in *Athletic Intruders*, ed. Bolin and Granskog, 107-29; Nik Cohn, *Women of Iron: The World of Female Bodybuilders* (New York, 1981); Katrina Veit, "Bodysculpt: Karen Voight" *Women's Sports and Fitness* (Jan./Feb. 1992), 52.

¹¹⁰ Thousands more, of course, exist in community center, not-for-profit, or school gymnasiums.

¹¹¹ See Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977); Thomas K. McCraw, "Rethinking the Trust Question," in *Regulation in Perspective: Historical Essays*, ed. Thomas K. McCraw (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 18-19. Obviously, the bulk of the industry remained highly competitive and fit the model of a peripheral trade developed by Chandler and his "school" of business historians.