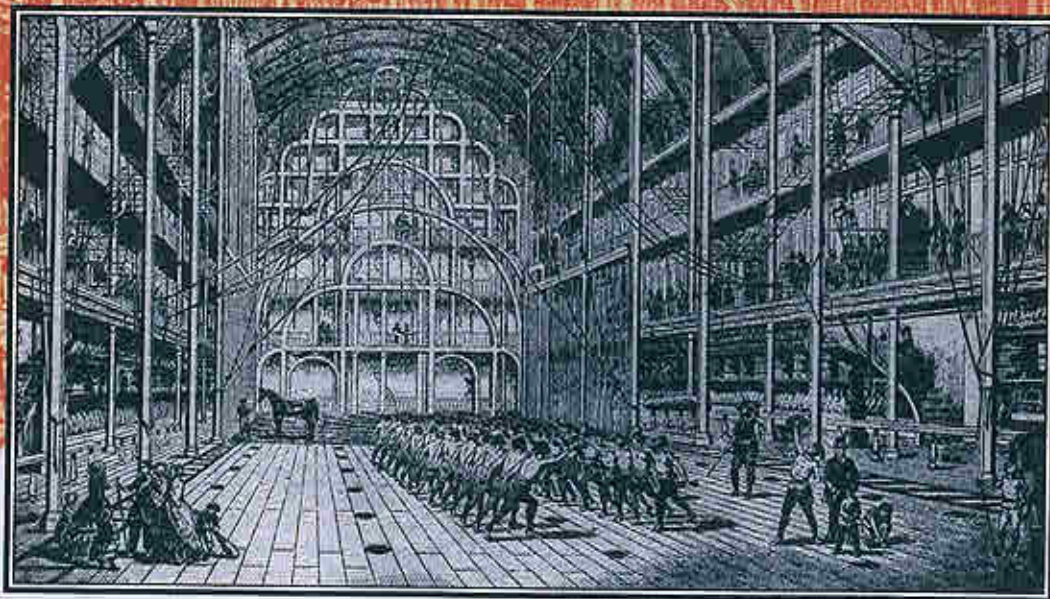


From cramped basements to spacious centers,
the modern fitness facility has experienced quite
a revolution during the past century.

The Evolution of Health Clubs



*Interior of the
Gymnase Triat,
from the collection
of David Chapman*

Health clubs are an established part of American culture. Even those who don't own a club membership are at least familiar with names like Gold's Gym and Bally Total Fitness. However, the pervasiveness of health clubs is a recent phenomenon.

The rise of the modern American health clubs began in California in the 1940s, but their predecessors came from 19th century Europe. The mid-

19th century witnessed the rise of Industrialism and an explosion of immigration into the cities. To combat the effects of sedentary deskwork, men began pursuing health and exercise.

Hippolyte Triat, a former vaudevilian strongman, opened a gymnasium in Paris in 1847, apparently responding to this rising interest in exercise. The Gymnase Triat is significant because it was among the first clubs to

charge for membership; the gym had different rates for men, women and children — ranging from 31 francs per month to 400 francs per year.

While Triat was popularizing exercise in Paris, physical activity gained supporters in England. Sir George Williams created the YMCA in London in 1841 as an attempt to substitute life on the streets with "Bible study and prayer." When Muscular Christianity

By Josh Buck, Contributing Writer

began in England in the 1850s, YMCAs became a leading champion of the movement. According to Muscular Christianity, good Christians exercised to keep the body healthy, for the body housed the Holy Spirit. By the 1860s, physical recreation was included in the curriculum of all YMCAs.

When Muscular Christianity crossed the ocean and came to America, its mission changed slightly and helped foster the collegiate sport teams, which people believed would help develop physical fitness, team spirit and certain militaristic tendencies thought essential for success in the business community. The appearance of the YMCAs in America also emphasized the importance of exercise; however, financial difficulty and the Civil War prevented the expansion of gymnasiums. Nonetheless, the YMCAs of America sealed their commitment to physical fitness with this statement made at their annual convention in 1864: "Any machinery will be incomplete which has not taken into account the whole man. We must add physical recreation to all YMCAs."

Before the proliferation of YMCAs, George Barker Windship preached throughout the United States on the virtues of weight lifting. In 1850, when he entered Harvard at age 16, Windship was the next-to-smallest student in his class. In an attempt to defend himself from bullies, Windship turned to gymnastics and weight training. Within a few years, he had developed his body enough to intimidate his intimidators. After graduating from Harvard Medical School, Windship began touring, lecturing on the rules of health and the special benefits of systematic weight training.

Sport historians consider Windship the impetus for the boom in American weight training, which is said to have begun on June 9, 1859, with Windship's first successful lecture. However, when Windship died suddenly from a stroke at age 42, opponents of weight lifting blamed exercise. Americans lost interest in weight lifting — but for only a short time.

The strongmen performing in vaudeville rekindled American interest in strength, and performers like Eugen Sandow opened clubs devoted to physical culture after retiring from the stage. Professor Louis Attila was

also a famous performer turned entrepreneur. His gym in New York City was a Mecca for weight lifters, and many influential people exercised there.

In the 1920s, vaudevillian strongmen's performances had changed; they included acrobatics and hand balancing in their acts. Many acrobats and gymnasts practiced their moves in Santa Monica, Calif., and by the late 1930s, the capital of muscle moved to a small strip of shoreline known as Muscle Beach.

From that immortal beach came many immortal individuals. Perhaps the most important person to emerge was Victor Tanny. Vic and his brother Armand opened a gym on Second Street in Santa Monica in 1940. The gym was in a small, second-story loft that the brothers rented for \$35 a month; membership was \$5 a month. They opened another gym in 1941 in Long Beach. Pearl Harbor's destruction brought America into World War II and coastal blackouts forced the Tannys' gyms to close.

Casualties of War

The war caused many other gyms to close as well. However, it also increased interest in weight training and exercise. In an effort to encourage patriotism and to reassure the American public, magazines like *Look* published photographs of healthy, robust athletes.

The military began employing former Muscle Beach regulars to train new recruits. Throughout the war, soldiers trained with weights for recreation and exercise. These men saw the benefits of regular exercise, and when they left the service, they needed places to work out. While gyms may have temporarily closed, they were in demand again after the war.

By 1947, Vic Tanny again had several gyms around Los Angeles, and by 1960, the Tanny empire totaled 84 gyms throughout the country. In 1963, Vic sold his clubs in an effort to retire. His retirement may have been hastened by financial and managerial troubles throughout his corporation. Regardless of his reasons for retiring, Vic left a legacy to modern clubs.



Photo courtesy of David Chapman

Vic Tanny revolutionized the industry with his health clubs. He created multipurpose facilities that were aesthetically pleasing in design.

The most significant effect Tanny had on modern clubs was a physical one. Joe Gold describes gyms before Tanny revolutionized their image as "the worst pieces of junk in the world ... everything was falling apart and [they] stunk. They were like dungeons!" This description is a far cry from today's clubs, and the reason is Tanny's entrepreneurial acumen. Armand explains that he and his brother "took the gyms out of the cellar" and created facilities so lavish that once prospective members entered the building, "they couldn't resist joining."

Tanny was a visionary. At a time when clubs specialized in particular sports, Vic offered many options: weight lifting, swimming, bowling, ice skating and even watching movies in theaters. His facilities were among the first multipurpose gyms; these newer, more attractive clubs offered a venue to socialize and make friends.

As creative as Tanny was, some of his ideas were more extravagant than others. Among his more opulent endeavors was a gilded gym. This club was completely finished in gold plating, down to the barbells and dumbbells. Although modern clubs aren't quite this lavish, most have a lot of chrome, carpeting and walls painted

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in aesthetically pleasing colors. This was not common before Tanny, and it is thanks to him that gyms are so attractive today.

Vic Tanny not only helped create the modern health club, he also inspired many others to build gyms. Joe Gold, a close friend of the Tannys, worked for a time in Vic's gym. In the 1950s, when the local government closed the Muscle Beach Weightlifting Club (a 20-by-25-foot L-shaped platform with weights), Joe tried, unsuccessfully, to convince friends to invest in a new club. He was finally able to open the first Gold's Gym in 1964 about two blocks from Muscle Beach for \$30,000.

Joe may have learned from Vic, but Gold's Gym was different from Tanny's gyms. Once the Muscle Beach Weightlifting Club closed, Joe saw a need for gyms that were devoted to body building. He sold the original Gold's Gym in 1970; nevertheless, in the

six years that he ran that small storefront gym, Gold offered several innovations that are now standard. For example, Joe explains that his gym was originally dark and cramped. To amend this problem, he installed skylights that brightened the room and made it seem more spacious. He also laid a concrete floor to withstand the heavy poundage dropped by his clientele. Joe's gym was rugged, solid and sturdy in comparison to Vic's sleeker, sportier and flashier gyms.

The Birth of American Health

Tanny and Gold were not the only revolutionaries in the industry. Modeling their clubs after German rehabilitation centers and European spas, Ray Wilson and Bob Delmontique began the American Health clubs in the 1950s, and by decade's end, owned 300 clubs throughout the United States. Delmontique explains that "Ray wanted to save the world" with his gyms, and they were among the first to offer therapeutic facilities. Their clubs began with weights only, but soon added whirl-

pools, saunas and steam baths.

Delmontique says that, like Tanny's gyms, American Health clubs "flavored exercise and made it taste good." They included full-length mirrors, carpeted floors, air conditioning and chrome weights instead of the standard black. Although they folded due to financial troubles in 1959, American Health clubs (like Tanny's gyms) were among the first gyms to have sizzle to them.

Financial troubles were not uncommon among gyms, and this led to the consolidation and creation of new club

did the clientele. Beginning with only die-hard lifters and serious body builders, amateur exercisers — encouraged by club owners like Tanny and Wilson — began working out as well. The erroneously nicknamed "Pudgy" Stockton and Jack LaLanne, each, in their own way, helped integrate women into the health clubs.

Pudgy owned several women's-only gyms. Early in her business career, she had to disguise the weights women used because it was improper for women to work out. Slowly, women's interest in, and acceptance of, exercise

grew, and many gyms began offering separate days for men and women. Today, women have become the best customers for clubs — making up more than half of all memberships.

Perhaps the greatest modern proponent of women's health was Jack LaLanne. Jack opened his first gym in 1936 in Oakland, Calif., and by 1982, had 200 around the country. He also hosted

American television's longest-running exercise program (*The Jack LaLanne Show*, 1956-1970).

Muscle Beach was able to educate thousands of passersby and spectators on health and exercise; Jack LaLanne reached millions — particularly women — through the power of television. His show taught his viewers, predominantly homemakers, how to exercise using household equipment: chairs, towels and broomsticks. There is little doubt that LaLanne's program caused more American women than ever to become interested in physical fitness.

Nowadays, the consumer appears to dictate the changes in health clubs, and as the baby boomers move from their desire for buffness to holistic and long-term health concerns, the gym is adapting to satisfy their needs. While today's gyms and health clubs are more advanced than ever, they are continuously evolving. There is little doubt that many exciting innovations and evolutionary changes await the health club in the new century. ♣

Photo by George Butler, courtesy of Gold's Gym



In 1964, Joe Gold opened the original Gold's Gym in Venice Beach, Calif., with an investment of \$30,000. The gym was located two blocks from Muscle Beach.

chains. In 1962, Dave Wildman of the Health and Tennis Corp., began buying struggling gyms — some bearing famous names such as Vic Tanny, Chicago Health, Jack LaLanne and Holiday Health.

Bally Manufacturing, a company specializing in gaming equipment, decided to broaden its endeavors and, in the early 1990s, bought Wildman's operation and became Bally Entertainment. After divvying its stock among shareholders in January 1996, Lee Hillman took the reins of the newest addition to the Bally stable: Bally Total Fitness. Because Bally is the amalgam of many other gyms, it benefits from its once-famous ancestors. However, in a tongue-in-cheek observation, Dave Southern, Bally's vice president of investor and public relations, points out one disadvantage: "Even though the sign says Bally Total Fitness, many people in Chicago still call our gyms Vic Tanny's."

As the look, equipment and, in some cases, the names of health clubs changed as the century progressed, so