

Can Fitness Bring People Together?

Determination is a very powerful factor when you are trying to achieve something. It is the force that drives people to do things to their maximum capabilities. These things can range from insignificant actions to seemingly impossible ones. Imagine this: a major university recreation center, where the amount of weight lifted by a person is usually triple digits, over 300 calories are burned at a machine, the average mile time is under ten minutes, and in the middle of it all is a male senior citizen, a brace over his ankle and a cane at his side, doing laps around the track. That should be the definition of determination.

CRCE (Campus Recreation Center East) is the epitome of a fast-paced, high quality college fitness center. After re-opening from major renovations in March 2005, CRCE offered its member, of which a great percentage consisted of college students, many features in the facility including up-to-date fitness machines, a 1/8 mile track, new free weights, 3 basketball courts and more. The facility is filled with many things to do to keep you in shape.

The renovations resulted from the student referendum held on November 12th and 13th in 2001. The proposition was a general fee increase of no more than \$77 per semester in order to improve campus recreation facilities. The total cost of the project was estimated to be \$77.6 million. Of the 5,456 students who participated in the vote, 74% supported the referendum. These renovations were scheduled to take place over a

three year period, beginning from 2005-2007 and the university would make sure that at least one facility was open while the other was worked on. (Archive Notes)

Walking in for the first time through the automatic doors I saw how bright and clean the place was. White-tiled floors below and plentiful lighting, natural and artificial, filled the room. To the right I see through floor to ceiling windows a gymnasium full of basketball players and to the left a swimming pool complete with slide and Jacuzzi. As I walked on I came to a small desk with two people sitting and letting people in. The girl working there, probably a college student herself, asks for my student I.D. card and swipes it through a card reader. The reader is connected to a computer monitor where my picture and information come on the screen after the card is swiped. She takes a last look at me to make sure I match the person in the photo, hands me the card, and says thank you. Now I'm in.

Moving on, I go up to the customer service desk to my right where bored employees look eager to do something interesting. The only action they get is to answer questions and rent out equipment. When asked where the fitness equipment is, the man behind the counter, probably another student, says to go up the stairs just down the hall. I thank him and move on. It is then that I noticed all of the flyers trying to convince people to get memberships or hire private trainers. Marketing fitness, as tough as it can be, is essential to most health centers. Legatt puts it best when she writes, "The sales department is especially vital in fitness clubs. The concept of health and fitness can be a tough sell because it isn't tangible. Potential members are buying a lifestyle and chance for physical improvement..." The concept of selling a product applies to every business, and CRCE was definitely no exception.

Beyond the customer service desk is a lounge area where a couple of sofas sit in front of a very large screen television usually playing ESPN or some other sports related show. I go around the sofas and up the stairs to the second floor.

Immediately after reaching the top, I look around and can see everything on the second floor. A track runs around the fitness equipment, free weights, and above the basketball courts. The second floor is crowded with people doing all kinds of physical activities. Looking around, I absent-mindedly forget where I'm standing, in the inside lane of the track. As a group of runners pass one yells at me to get out of the way and I quickly move to avoid the stampede of people.

Why would people use a track? My opinion at that time was that there were two reasonable options when it came to running – outdoors and a treadmill. A track, except for sports purposes, seemed like an unneeded middleman. While contemplating the purpose of a track, besides the advantage of measuring distance, the question of what kind of material was used to make a track came to mind. I later found out that urethane, which introduced 'relaxation' time to the world of running, was the material of choice when it came to modern tracks. Williams described relaxation time perfectly in the following, "If the track surface's 'relaxation' time -- or time it takes to reorient itself on impact -- is too fast, it'll seem jarring to the athlete," continues Garrett. "If it's too slow, it'll feel energy absorbing, like running in sand. A good track will strike the balance between dynamic response for performance and cushioning for training."(83) Relaxation time is very important in the impact it has on the runner's body. A fast relaxation time could be very detrimental to the body's joints. A track could not completely eliminate all impact, but at least the type of impact would not be as bad as running on concrete or

cement. These surfaces have a very fast relaxation time that over a long period could do serious damage to the body.

As further observation would inform me, I learned that the track changed direction every couple of days. I wasn't sure why this happened and after asking many of the people who used the track, I still came up with no explanation. It seems that no one knows exactly why it is changed but there are a lot of ongoing theories. For example, one guy I asked said that it had to do with structure and that changing the direction every so often helped to keep the wear and tear on the track even.

After the large group of people had passed is when I noticed the older gentleman, white-haired and balding, a walking cane at his side and a large ankle brace on his right foot. He moved on steadily in the farthest lane, which is unofficially the slowest, with no regard to those passing him by or almost running into him. Determination was in his eyes as he glanced at the large digital timer display above the track. Deciding he wasn't finished yet he looked straight ahead and continued on. My initial reaction was to see if he needed any kind of assistance. He seemed like a person I'd hold the door for or help across the street. But his manner, the tone of his body, and the look in his eyes told me he neither wanted help nor needed it. He would finish on his own.

I turned around to see the rest of the second floor when the sound of a paper towel dispenser caught my attention. I looked to see a girl, taking a paper towel, spraying it with something and wiping off a machine.

“What are you wiping it with?” I asked her, looking at the green bottle on top of the paper towel dispenser. It didn't have any significant markings on it, just a generic plastic spray bottle. She replied it was disinfectant spray. After a person finished using

any machine, as more of a courtesy than a requirement they should get a paper towel with disinfectant spray and clean the machine for the next person.

This was also interesting to me. I knew that places like this where sweat and germs got everywhere that sanitation was very important. I had just always figured that the people working at that facility would take care of it. But offering a chance to clean up after yourself seems to give everyone a sense of responsibility there. I asked what would happen if someone didn't clean his or her machine after finishing and her response was "That's disgusting! You should probably tell them to. I would if I saw someone not clean it off." I kept that in mind as I walked past more machines.

Looking around the fitness area, I saw three main types of machines: treadmills, elliptical machines, and stationary bikes. They were organized in three rows, stationary bikes making up the first row, treadmills the second, and elliptical machines the third. Treadmills imitate the act of walking or running, as the speed of the rolling belt underneath can be adjusted to the desired speed. An elliptical imitates the motion of skiing but provides a similar result in terms of heart rate increase. And stationary bikes are pretty self-explanatory; they imitate biking without any actual movement.

A young man was getting off one of the treadmill, about to wipe his machine off when I decided to ask him more about the treadmill. My first question was why he was using the treadmill, more specifically, what more it offered him than the track. His response pertained to the technology it had, things like the heart rate monitor and calorie counter. Running on the track couldn't give him information like that. His comment about the track was, "It can only tell me how long I've been running for." Not

completely satisfied with his answer, I decided to look into the world of treadmills even more.

Treadmills provide an indoor option to running and walking as there can be many problems with doing these activities outside. Gray presents these problems in his article. “The problem is that it isn’t fun or even feasible to walk or run in seriously inclement weather; it isn’t safe to run in various districts in cities or on deserted roads; and it’s not a good idea to run late at night without one or more running partners...Treadmills allow you to enjoy a safe and convenient indoor workout, and with so many choices, you will have no trouble finding a treadmill that is just right for you at a price you can afford.” (1)

The treadmill also provided technological features such as a heart rate monitor, distance measurer, and a calorie counter. Because it is electronic, the treadmill can have information stored and calculated to give the runner an accurate presentation of his or her progress. I could see now why treadmills were a great alternative to running outside or on the track, because they not only imitated running but also had extra features and provided more information about the runner to the runner.

After the gentleman on the treadmill left, I noticed that the treadmills were pretty empty except for a few in use. That’s when I noticed the signup boards. There was a separate board for each row. Each board has 30-minute time slots for each machine in the row starting from open to close. Looking at these boards, I can easily tell that the most popular machine here are the elliptical trainers as they are signed up through a much later time than either of the other machines. While looking at the boards a girl came up to check the board, saw her initials at the present time slot and walked over to the

machine she reserved. I noticed that another girl was using the machine she had reserved at the time and so I moved closer to hear the exchange of words.

“Excuse me, I reserved this for the right now, “ was all she said to the person using her machine. No other words exchanged as the other girl nodded and got off the machine. Not only did she give up the machine, but also she came back with a paper towel and disinfectant spray and cleaned the machine. The waiting girl said a brief thank you, turned on her Ipod, and got on the machine. So all you had to do if u reserved a machine is tell the person using it and there wouldn't be any problems, or at least that's how it seemed after this authentic example.

The machine that had been reserved was an elliptical trainer and the girl kicked off was my recent acquaintance – the girl who had been wiping off her machine earlier. I decided to ask her more about the elliptical, and why she was using it and not the treadmill or track.

Elliptical machines, also known as elliptical trainers, provide similar results but have a much different procedure than the treadmill. Elliptical machines boast an advantage known as “low-impact workout”. This type of workout has very little impact on joints in the body. A treadmill does not have this type of feature because of the continuous impact of each step, causing the runner to absorb the impact force (Unknown, 1). The article “Treadmill vs. Elliptical Trainer” describes the feature of low-impact workouts, saying, “Elliptical trainers allow the athlete to burn a similar number of calories as jogging...but without the risk of injury to the back, knees, hips, or ankles. Your feet never leave the pedals. As a result, this type of machine is quite low-impact and goes easy on the joints.”(1) Some elliptical machine designs also allow another advantage

not available on treadmills: moving handlebars that imitate the motion of cross-country skiing. This action combined with the normal lower body exercise gives the entire body a great workout and can potentially burn more calories than running.

The girl who had just used the elliptical trainer gave similar reasons to why she used the machine. She claimed she had really weak joints and any kind vigorous running on a continual basis would place a lot of stress on those joints. For her, the elliptical trainer was the perfect machine because it didn't stress her body joints while still giving her a great workout. I understood that the track and treadmill were high-impact cardio machines, so I asked her about the stationary bikes and why she wouldn't use those. She said that it was a low-impact cardio machine but it didn't work her out fast enough. In other words, the stationary bike didn't increase her heart rate fast enough or get it to the desired level for working out. As we parted ways for the second time I decided to head over to the stationary bikes to see what they were all about.

Upon arriving at the first row, the first thing I noticed was the view. The first row had a railing in front of it, and the drops below were the basketball courts. Anyone using a machine in this row had a really great view of the games going on underneath. Other than that, there was no view of the televisions or the rest of the second floor. There were a couple of people using the bikes, so I decided to ask one of them about the bikes.

The last major cardio machine in CRCE is the stationary bike. It is exactly what its name says, a bike that doesn't move. It provides the same type of cardio workout that riding a normal bike would without actually going anywhere. It also provides the low-impact type of workout that an elliptical does because people using it are not stepping anywhere. The process consists of a continual circular pedaling, causing an increased

heart rate. The machine also has different levels of resistance to provide the exerciser with an increasing challenge as their fitness level improved.

So the person I started a conversation with was a male, about 5'8", 160 lbs, and seemed to be in really good shape. The conversation started casually, I asked him about his workout schedule and the types of exercises he did, especially with the bike. His response was that he came to CRCE every weekday, Monday to Friday, and rode the bikes for 30 minutes. He said he also did a lot of abdominal work every time he came. When asked why he chose the bikes over the other machines or track he said that he enjoyed the bikes because it put all of the stress on his legs plus it was low-impact.

As I walked back to the middle, I noticed that the televisions weren't working. There was just dark static on each screen. The other noticeable thing was the lack of people using the treadmills. None of them were being used. It would make sense though, that nobody would use a treadmill if the televisions weren't working. Without any entertainment, running on a treadmill just became a stationary track, and I guess people had decided that there would be more interesting sights to see on the track. So when I walked over to examine the track, it seemed as though it were a bit more crowded than usual.

The first thing I heard when I neared the track was a confrontation. It seemed that there had been a girl walking in the first lane, which I later learned is the fastest moving lane. The lanes got slower as they moved outwards. Two other girls who had been running and had yelled at her to move out of the way because she was slowing down the lane. She yelled back at them as they jogged passed her and the situation ended. One of the runners had just finished and was doing a little stretching to help avoid injury. I was

hoping to get a more detailed perspective of the facility, especially the track and cardio machines. I would later interview this gentleman, whom we will call Todd for this project.

Todd is a freshman who goes to CRCE about four days a week. He has a schedule where he works out different muscles of the body such as arms, chest, and back for each time he goes. He also incorporates cardio workouts into his daily routine. Running outside if it weren't too cold would be the first option, and if the weather were not permitting then he would run on the track at CRCE. Todd's reason for not wanting to use the treadmill is because he likes to feel like he is actually going somewhere, something that the treadmill was specifically designed not to do. When asked if there were any machines that he would use he said his choice was the elliptical. Only if his knees were weak from consistent running would he ever use the machine. But according to him it did provide the increased heart rate in order to have a good workout.

Moving on to the subject of motivation, at the beginning of the semester I was presented with the idea of how structural design of a fitness complex affected its members. More specifically, how open space and the idea of seeing everyone else working out around you would help your motivation. When presented with this idea, Todd said that he felt no motivation by seeing others and said he felt no connection with them either. To him working out is very personal thing. He makes this clear by saying, "For me (working out) is more of a personal thing and like, when you are working out you just have to find your own rhythm and stick with that." I interpreted this expression as that people have to figure out his or her exercise style, adapt their schedule to it, and stick with that particular program. In terms of belongingness to a subculture, he claimed

there was no effect and he had no feelings towards others in the subculture and his final comment on motivation was that it is derived from internal matters and that there were no significant effects from others.

The interview was very helpful in explaining some of the actions of the members of the subculture. From his responses, I got the feeling that this group of people performed similar actions completely independent of one another. They were connected only in a physical aspect; that being that they were all in the same place at the same time. Otherwise each person had their own specific goals and did whatever they needed and/or wanted to in order to achieve those goals.

Making a final pass through the area, I looked at all the options available to members here: the elliptical trainer, the treadmill, the bikes, and the track. Each had its own advantages and disadvantages and people used them based on those pros and cons. I learned that each and every person has his or her own agenda, as well as strategy to get through that agenda. They use these facilities at CRCE to fit their needs and achieve their goals. But even with all of these options, I realized that to keep coming in day after day to work out couldn't be easy, even with a facility as nice and newly renovated as CRCE. It would take a lot of motivation, motivation that one member of the subculture thought came from within oneself. Todd's sense of belongingness to the subculture could clearly be seen in the comment, "I don't really like comparing myself or finding motivation in others. Just find motivation in yourself."

When I reached the stairs leading to the first floor, I checked the track one more time. There again was my definition for determination. Coming around the corner to complete another lap I watched him move with a steady rhythm now. There was no

decrease in speed, no tiredness in posture, just the look of determination in his eye and the extra bounce in his step as he glanced at the timer and thought to himself. A smile came to his face as he brought his eyes straight in front of him and kept up the steady pace. He would finish on his own.