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South Florida gyms are thriving in spite of downturn

Health clubs stand test of hard times, buck national trend

By Arlene Satchell

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In South Florida, working out at the gym isn't something many people are willing to forgo despite the slow economy.

Several health clubs recently have opened and more are on the way, a sign that the area could be bucking a national trend of declining health club memberships.

In 2007, gym memberships slipped nationwide to 41.5 million from 42.7 million in 2006, the first decline in 10 years, according to the International Health, Racquet & Sportclub Association, a fitness trade group in Boston.

"Even though it's hard times, we can't afford to have people turn away from exercise, especially as Americans' waistlines are expanding and medical issues like obesity are increasing," said Rosemary Lavery, a spokeswoman for the international sportclub association.

Cafeteria manager Mary DeVito joined 24 Hour Fitness's Shaq Super Sport Club in [Boynton Beach](#) shortly after it opened in May, determined to lose the weight she gained after giving birth to her daughter, Marissa, in 2004.

DeVito belonged to another local gym for two years but said 24 Hour was more convenient because it's less crowded weekdays after 6 p.m.

While exercise remains a priority, some are making fitness adjustments because of the economy.

Miami Gardens resident Marcia Grant, who works out at 24 Hour's Shaq-Sportclub in Pembroke Pines, said she's cut back on trips to the gym because of high gas prices.

But Grant, who has high blood pressure, won't abandon her workout routine because it helps her relieve the stress of the region's rising cost of living.

24 Hour Fitness, a 25-year-old private health club chain, is growing rapidly in South Florida.



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Since January, the San Ramon, Calif.-based company has opened health clubs in [Boynton Beach](#), Greenacres, Kendall and Cutler Ridge. Two more are planned for Miramar and Sunrise this year.

"We're very happy with this market," said Tony Wells, the chain's chief marketing officer.

Wells said the high cost of gas is working in the company's favor as people nix travel plans and look for things to do closer to home.

Health clubs like 24 Hour Fitness, with membership fees starting around \$32 a month, offer pools, saunas, basketball and racquetball courts and kids clubs, in addition to cardio and weight-training equipment.

LA Fitness is also adding to its 21 clubs in South Florida. The Irvine, Calif.-based fitness chain is opening gyms in east [Boca Raton](#) and Kendall later this year.

Kim Martin and Michelle Moran of Pembroke Pines work out more than three days a week at the LA Fitness at 18445 Pines Blvd., which opened in October.

For these longtime friends, fitness is a way of life, and they have no plans to trim their workout schedule.

"We'll do it no matter what," Moran said.

Later this year, Retro Fitness, a New Jersey chain with a \$19.99 "one-price" monthly membership fee and 1980s decor, will open its first Florida location in Margate. The franchise owner, Rob Berlin, isn't daunted as a newcomer in an area flanked by national health club chains.

"It'll be our downfall, if we don't open," Berlin said. "If in a bad economy 24 Hour and LA Fitness can survive, Retro Fitness will dominate."

In addition to cardio and weight training equipment, personal trainers and a juice bar, the gym will feature a cardio theater, showing movies like *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* as members work out.

Despite the resilient South Florida fitness market, some gyms are enduring economic pains.

In [Boca Raton](#) at Michael's Body Scenes, some clients have canceled memberships to cut costs, spokesman Michael Papamicheal said.

Business in January, typically the banner month of the year, was down almost 20 percent compared with last year, he said.

This year, Papamicheal also raised fees for older gym memberships, but added extras like free spinning classes.

Besides the national chains, many independent health clubs help keep South Floridians fit.

Studio 4 Fitness and Wellness Center in Coral Springs expanded to Pembroke Pines in June, taking over the Platinum Fitness gym at 20170 Pines Blvd.

"Obviously it's a scary time right now, but [the slump] really hasn't affected us at all," Studio 4 co-owner Rich Maston said.

In Coral Springs, where only private fitness training sessions are offered, June — typically a slow month — was one of the best months this year, Maston said.

A fitness routine is the last thing people give up because it keeps their medical bills in check, Maston said.

In February, 30-year fitness industry veteran Gary Mackler opened Xpress Fitness Club of Jupiter Inc. He already has nearly 1,000 members. Club members include faculty, staff and students from nearby Florida Atlantic University and the Scripps Research Institute.

People value their health club memberships for fitness and social networking, Mackler said.

"Fitness is no longer a fad that people conveniently use when it suits them. It's just as important as anything [else] that they spend money on."

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Health clubs in Florida

860

Florida health clubs in 1995

1,691

Florida health clubs in 2005

1,783

Florida health clubs in 2007

U.S. fitness industry

As of January 2008:

29,636 health clubs

41.5 million health club members

Source: International Health Racquet & Sportsclub Association

U.S. health club members

2003: 39.4 million

2004: 41.3 million

2005: 41.3 million

2006: 42.7 million

2007: 41.5 million

Source: International Health Racquet & Sportsclub Association

Have you given up your gym membership because of a struggling economy? Sound off in our poll at Sun-Sentinel.com/business

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