

Fitness centers prepare for an atypical winter season *How locals can avoid a fitness freeze at home*

Derek Futterman | December 17, 2020 | Long Island Herald

Local gyms have been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic, but despite the steadily rising number of Covid-19 cases, fitness center owners and managers have done their best to remain optimistic, assuring the community that their facilities have not, and will not, become hot spots for spreading the virus.

Richard Schutt, the general manager of Long Island Health and Racquet, in Wantagh, pledges to “take care of the members” for as long as he is employed.

“I started coming here when I was 5 years old,” Schutt said. “The members’ health and safety come first to me, and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep them healthy and happy.”

Covid-19 has proven to be highly contagious, but gym owners are following state and federal guidelines, making sure patrons wear masks and keep their distance from one another, and frequently disinfecting equipment and other surfaces.

“We take the mask-wearing extremely seriously,” said Schutt. “You have to wear the mask, or you are not here.”

The protocols have proven to be effective, as Long Island Health and Racquet has not had a single case of Covid-19 traced back to its facility. Likewise, other gyms, such as Onyx Fitness in Bellmore, just blocks from the Wantagh border, have been successful in slowing the spread. Onyx services many masked Wantagh and Seaford residents who are willing to adhere to social distancing guidelines when they work out.

“We’ve had over 25,000 check-ins since we opened on Aug. 31,” said Onyx owner Jordan Stein. “We haven’t had one case traced back to the club.”

Because of the stringent rules, many exercise enthusiasts have converted parts of their homes into workout areas. According to Jessica Reilly, the owner of Ladies Wellness Experience, in Seaford, “90 percent of our clients are still attending all their classes virtually” — because many of those clients are members of an older, higher-risk population.

Reilly re-evaluated her business, formerly known as Ladies Workout Express, during the pandemic, and realized that “mental health is just as important as physical health,” she said. Rebranding the business was something Reilly had been thinking about, and the coronavirus crisis gave her the perfect opportunity to incorporate both aspects of clients’ well-being into her classes.

“Even though you can be physically healthy, if you’re home and depressed and you’re not coping mentally, then your overall wellness is just not there,” Reilly explained. “We call most of our members on a regular basis to make sure that they’re OK.”

Many fitness centers have not only adapted their spaces to physical distancing but have also made all their classes and workshops available online. “We’ve been holding a good percentage of our classes outside, but we’re ready to push forward to do virtual

classes,” said Schutt, acknowledging the changing weather. “We plan on doing classes more virtually if we have to shut down.”

Since gyms are all about members — and continuing to attract them — managers and owners insist they are ready to adapt at a moment’s notice if conditions change again or new restrictions are put in place. “At the beginning of the pandemic,” Stein recalled, “I was driving to people’s houses, and they were putting all of their electronics in the backyard so I could set them up and hook them up.”

Local fitness centers also offer at-home workouts through regular email blasts in order for their clientele to stay fit while adhering to a more remote and sedentary lifestyle. Their goal is to have their clients establish and commit to a routine, even at home.

“[When] people are lost and don’t have a routine, that’s when [they] start to eat more and forget about working out,” Stein said. “That’s the biggest disruptor here. You have to adapt and get back into a routine as quickly as possible.”

Schutt suggested that people take daily walks and maintain a positive mindset — while encouraging them to join a fitness center.

Gym staffers continue to stress that they are in this struggle right alongside the residents who frequent their squeaky-clean workout spaces. “Even though we’re socially distant, we’re still a community with a common goal,” Stein said. “We will get through this together.”