

HEALTHY LIVING

Gym dandies

Camaraderie keeps exercise mavens coming back to women's-only facility

BY LORETTA GRANTHAM

Cox News Service

West Palm Beach, Fla.

Even the sun isn't up at this hour. Not quite, anyway.

But 16 smiling, chatting, clearly happy-to-be-here women are huddled outside a strip mall just north of Lake Worth, Fla.

They didn't rise and shine to reap early-bird bargains at a one-day sale. No, they're here to work out. To exercise, of all things. And many make this predawn pilgrimage five days a week.

Behold the lure of Curves fitness center for women, the sixth largest franchise firm in the United States.

More than 10,000 Curves have cropped up worldwide since the first franchise opened in Paris, Texas, in 1995 (the original Curves opened three years earlier in the Lone Star town of Harlingen). But many of the gyms are up for sale, prompting some to wonder whether the chain has lost its luster.

"We tried to keep clubs open that shouldn't have stayed open," says Curves International spokeswoman Becky Frusher. "That probably wasn't the smartest business decision, but we still have a very low closing rate."

The company, which crunches a formula of population, potential growth and proximity to other Curves to determine where a franchise might succeed, has slowed its frenetic U.S. expansion pace.

"There are some areas where you can't buy a Curves unless it's a resale, like in Manhattan," she says. "But that's not the case in Florida where there's still a lot of development to come."

Despite some closures and resale shuffling, the initial formula for success has kept Curves going strong: 30 minutes in and out using simple machines that don't need adjusting (just hop on and go). A predetermined workout circuit so you can check your brain at the door. No men, no mirrors and no prancing in spandex.

There are other women's-only gyms, and many chains now offer 30-minute express programs. But Curves has preserved its niche — mostly middle-aged women who'd rather not sweat alongside grunting body-builders — through member camaraderie and hands-on franchise owners.

A 'support group' of sorts

That combo is apparent on a recent morning near Lake Worth as a coffee klatch of gals, many in matching "Curves Cares" angel T-shirts, wait for owners Jane Ward and Rich Glennon to whip into the parking lot and unlock the gym. Ward has dubbed the group, ranging in age from 40s to 70s, her Wake-Up Angels (aka Early Morning Angels, depending on whom you ask).

Although Curves members don't have to show up at a set time, this diverse pack, which includes two nuns and an assistant public defender, is die-hard about its 7 a.m. ritual.

"I can come anytime, but I just like these people," says retiree Claire Johnson of West Palm Beach, Fla., doing arm curls as peppy music pulsates.

Every 30 seconds, a recorded voice instructs, "Change stations now." Members switch from hydraulic machines — the faster you go, the harder it is — to springy pads on which they walk or jog in place. Resistance, then aerobics. Resistance, then aerobics. Three times around, and you're done.

"It motivates you to get out of bed," Johnson says. "This is my support group."

Lake Worth couple Ward and Glennon opened their Curves in 2003 and have about 180 members, from age 13 to 88.

"We love what we do, and we believe in what we do," Ward says. "Our members are our family. We lost our home after



PHOTOS BY RICHARD GRAULICH/COX NEWS SERVICE

Members often bond over exercise, says Margaret Good-Earnest of West Palm Beach, Fla. "I like that there are workout buddies here. I call it adult play period for women," she says of the 30-minute women-only workouts.

Hurricane Jeanne, and women brought us food and kept an eye on the club if we had to run home to meet a contractor or a plumber. They've been incredible."

Glennon (yes, he's a guy, but everyone's OK with it) greets members by name or with an enthusiastic "Hello, dear!" as he holds the door.

The mood here is, well, joyous. And it's barely 7:10 a.m. There's no sauna, juice bar or tanning bed. Just no-frills fitness among friends, many of whom hook up outside the gym for breakfast, field trips and volunteer work.

"This place practically saved my life," says Paula Burns, a West Palm Beach marketing assistant, whose 23-year marriage ended in divorce. "It was a very painful transition for me. I could barely stop crying, and I started working out to rid myself of my depression."

"The sisters are always here, too, and you can talk to them. They bring us spirituality."

Sisters Yvonne Arcand and Barbara Gress helped launch Holy Cross Preschool and Center, which opened in West Palm Beach in 2003. They work out five mornings a week.

"We didn't know how receptive they would be to nuns barging into their group," Arcand says, laughing. "But these women are just fabulous. It's been a blessing for us as well."

Half a Krispy Kreme?

Frusher says many clients don't initially seek such bonds. But then they're pleasantly surprised.

"Focus-group participants don't mention community as something they're looking for at first, but then they find it and like it," says Frusher, who works at Curves' headquarters near Waco, Texas.

That sentiment — that Curves is a global sorority as well as a gym — is part of why many seasonal Florida residents join the franchise. Member Jan Courtemanche, for instance, lives in New Hampshire six months a year. Marlene Ditzenberger spends half the year in Pennsylvania.

They're among 16 women who show up when the door opens at the Hobe Sound, Fla., Curves. The only difference between these women and those at the Lake Worth facility? They show up at 6:30 a.m., a half-hour earlier.

Courtemanche and Ditzenberger go to Curves in the Northeast and have the "change stations now" routine down pat.

They also know that they'll meet peers

who have similar fitness goals: to stay active and tone up, not train for a marathon.

But critics say Curves' exercise edict — 30 minutes a day, three days a week — falls short of what most folks need to stay fit. A 2005 American Council on Exercise study shows a typical Curves session burns about as many calories as what's in half a Krispy Kreme doughnut. Not a lot, but better than nothing. And results depend on workout intensity.

Doughnut aside, many members in both West Palm Beach and Hobe Sound report weight-loss triumphs, including one woman who has dropped 150 pounds. Owners say very few members, even those who significantly boost their fitness level, move on to mainstream health clubs like Gold's Gym or Bally.

"Those are not the people who come to Curves in the first place," Frusher says. "The conventional gym atmosphere isn't what they want."

From member to owner

Curves facilities, which typically feature eight to 12 resistance machines, sprang up because at just 1,000 to 2,000 square feet, they could be slipped in most anywhere. Compare that to massive multipurpose gyms that can require up to 40,000 square

feet for group fitness studios, locker rooms and other amenities.

The Curves in Hobe Sound, which opened in 2003 and features bright turquoise walls, beach decor and fresh flowers, is roomy but still intimate. Owner Jackie Esker decided to pursue a franchise after working out at the Curves in Palm City, Fla.

"I really fell in love with the concept," says the former real estate agent. "The only available location at that time was Hobe Sound. It wasn't my first choice, but then I was surprised. People just completely bombarded me."

The gym has 300 members ages 14 to 87 and is active in the community, holding food drives and raising money for breast-cancer awareness, The Humane Society and other charities.

As the sun creeps up, women from the first workout group, including a postal worker and bank employee, scurry off to start their day.

"My husband said, 'I can't believe you're quitting real estate when there's so much money to be made,'" says Esker, sitting at the front desk and pausing to greet members as they come and go.

"But it's not about the money for me. Until you're in an environment like this, you don't know how good women are." ■

— Cox News Service researcher Michelle Quigley contributed to this article.

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