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Are gyms going out of business

After a year in which people spent months cooped up at home getting very little exercise, New Year's resolutions have taken on a little more weight in 2021. The fitness industry can attest. Despite the coronavirus restricting gym capacity while shuttering some entirely, the traditional January spike in memberships has matched—and in some ways exceeded—those of years past. Part of that can be tied to the predictable explosion of online classes, and a move toward maintaining mental as well as physical health. TOLEDO, Ohio (AP) — Going to the gym was always part of Kari Hamra's routine until last year's government-ordered shutdowns forced her to replace the workouts with daily rides on her Peloton stationary bike. That's when she discovered something surprising — she did not miss the gym. At least not the driving back and forth, filling water bottles, changing clothes and most of all, taking time away from her husband and two boys. Now that her gym in Springfield, Missouri, is open again, she's slowly returning. But finding a more convenient exercise schedule at home and seeing a surge of COVID-19 cases in her hometown this summer have her questioning how much she needs the gym. She figures that if there never had been a coronavirus outbreak "I would still be a gym rat." The pandemic has reshaped how Americans exercise and upended the fitness industry, accelerating the growth of a new era of high-tech home workout equipment and virtual classes. Thousands of small fitness centers and studios that were forced to close a year ago now are gone for good. Others are struggling to stay afloat and have redesigned their spaces, turned toward more personal workouts and added online training. The question is can they survive the onslaught from the apps and pricey bikes and treadmills or will they go the way of arcades, video rental shops and bookstores. Interactive fitness equipment maker Peloton is betting the workout-from-home trend is here to stay. It's breaking ground Monday on its first U.S. factory just outside Toledo, Ohio, where it plans to begin production in 2023 and employ 2,000 workers. Demand surged so much during the pandemic that some Peloton customers had to wait months for their bikes. While the company said the backlog has waned, it reported that sales have continued to soar, up 141% in the first three months of this year. Company founder and CEO John Foley thinks it's inevitable that technology-driven home fitness will become dominant much like how streaming services have changed movie watching, calling the idea of going to a gym "a broken model of yesteryear." Its next steps include bringing more of its equipment into gyms at hotels, apartment complexes, and college campuses and launching new workouts through its app. Late last year, it acquired Precor, a company with manufacturing and product development sites in the U.S. "Fitness is one of the few remaining categories that is going to be massively disrupted by a digital experience," Foley told The Associated Press. During the early months of the pandemic, most small and independent gyms and studios turned to Zoom and other video platforms for yoga and Pilates classes and training sessions because it was the only way they could connect with their members. "Now there's an expectation for it," said Michael Stack, CEO of Applied Fitness Solutions, which has three fitness centers in southeast Michigan. Small gyms can't match the production quality and visual appeal of the high-tech companies, but they can counter with online offerings that feature personal attention and closer relationships between their members and staff, he said. "I think that's the way we even the playing field," Stack said. Not all gym operators are convinced virtual training will play a significant role in what they offer. "We don't have the budget to do it at the same price and the same quality," said Jeff Sanders, CEO of Apex Athletic Health Club in Penfield, New York. "Digital is great, but we've seen surveys that show people want to stay active, but miss the interaction and being around others." His company is planning to open a third, smaller location near Orlando, Florida, that offers a more intimate experience. Those type of boutique studios could be the wave of the future, he said. The pandemic has changed how the fitness industry evaluates itself and right now "everyone's making decisions just to survive," Sanders said. Roughly 9,000 health clubs — 22% of the total nationwide — have closed since the beginning of the virus outbreak and 1.5 million workers lost their jobs, according to the International Health Racquet & Sportsclub Association. The industry group is lobbying Congress to approve a \$30 billion relief fund for the fitness industry because many clubs are struggling to recover from months of lost revenue and membership declines and still owe back rent. While more closings are likely this year and could number in the thousands without government help, the emergence of the workout-from-home trend won't spell doom for the fitness centers, said Helen Durkin, the association's executive vice president of public policy. Plenty of exercise fanatics, she said, will still do both — 40% of Peloton users have gym memberships, according to the company. There's no doubt digital fitness is here to stay, said Michelle Segar, director of the University of Michigan's Sport, Health and Activity Research and Policy Center. "People are integrating their lives with technology. This is where society is, and it's just going to get more integrated," she said. The biggest positives with the virtual training sessions are that they offer more flexibility when it comes to staying with workout routines and can draw more people into fitness, including those who can't follow a rigid schedule. "That's why people don't stick with it," she said. Cindy Cicchinelli, who's become a dedicated Peloton user after going to her gym in Pittsburgh for years, said the convenience is what has sold her. "I can roll out of bed and not worry about running to the gym," she said. "And I don't have to add an extra half-hour for my commute." Fitness industry leaders say research has shown that health clubs pose no more risk of spreading the virus than other public spaces. But San Francisco gym owner Dave Karraker thinks it will be a long time before many people are comfortable going into a big, tightly packed fitness center. "They are going to be thinking about ventilation and air purifiers and how long ago was this equipment sanitized," he said. He reconfigured MX3 Fitness's two small studios and created personal workout spaces. It has become so popular he's looking for a third location. He's not surprised that people are coming back even though safety remains a concern. "They don't want to live this solitary existence anymore," he said. "There's all kinds of motivations. Let's face facts, gyms are great ways to meet new people, especially if you're single." Follow AP's coverage of the pandemic at . In the before times, the dawn of a new year was always a boom time for gyms. But as we approach the second anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic, the fitness industry is struggling to increase—and, in some cases, even maintain—its body mass. Nearly two years of shutdowns and mask mandates have taken a big toll: According to IHRSA, the global health and fitness coalition, 27% of the gyms open in 2019 had permanently closed by summer 2021. In San Francisco, around a dozen independent gyms closed, according to Dave Karraker, the co-owner of MX3 Fitness in the Castro and a leader of the San Francisco Independent Fitness Studio Coalition, leaving about 80 independent fitness studios operating in the city. The survivors are merging insights and best practices learned during the pandemic with the old-school hospitality that has traditionally helped drive their business. Dean Eriksen, co-owner of San Francisco independent fitness company Fit Local Fit, said the pandemic has fundamentally changed his business model. He now views a hybrid experience—time in the gym, and time working out at home—as key to the future of his business and the fitness industry writ large. "There's going to be times when you want to go to the gym and you have time to go to the gym and there's going to be times when the opposite is true," Eriksen said. "Having that digital solution is critical in the evolution of the fitness industry, simply because it gives patrons the opportunity to engage in a number of different ways." Case in point: Fit Local Fit has teamed up with a vendor who offers a library of on-demand workout programs that customers can use either at the gym or at home. But Eriksen believes in bricks-and-mortar too. His company is slated to open its third location in the Sunset sometime in the first quarter of 2022 after a multiyear permitting and construction process. Other business owners are pivoting away from virtual experiences and have redoubled their efforts to bring clients back in person. Billy Polson, co-owner of SoMa fitness studio DIAKADI, said with "the market being completely saturated" a key differentiator is the personalized high-touch model that his trainers employ. Instead of adopting online options, DIAKADI built out an outdoor turf gym to continue its operations during the depths of the pandemic. "We came to the decision that our one-on-one training service has an element to it that absolutely cannot be duplicated online," Polson said. "You can have a lot of great generic programming and a lot of hands-off work, but there is definitely a ceiling to that and we have always worked to be above that ceiling." Tony Ward, president of the Americas for Xero, which provides accounting software to small and medium-sized businesses, said marketing will be key for fitness centers to differentiate themselves and compete with home machines like Peloton and Tempo that gym-goers may have flocked to during the pandemic. Ward, a former gym owner himself, said that he's seen gyms start to promote their safety and cleanliness factors to allay concerns about the pandemic. "What are airlines saying? The safest place to be right now is on an airplane," Ward said, adding that he's seen some gyms have success by advertising their outdoor workout options. "I would be overemphasizing that the safest place for you to be is in the gym." As in other sectors of the economy, a labor shortage is further complicating the industry's comeback plans. Polson has seen a number of his company's training professionals depart to go independent in the wake of the extended closures, leaving the battle for remaining talent even more fierce. "When all the facilities were closed, they had to build their own business model without having a facility, so at that point in time, they basically got a raise," Polson said. DIAKADI operates on a business model where independent trainers run their businesses out of the company's facilities which contain training equipment, support staff and top-of-the-line amenities. "A lot of the trainers that went out and built their own thing have no reason to come back in and start paying rent to us because they either have a garage, gym or they're outside, or they've made it work virtually," Polson said. Out of the 84 trainers that DIAKADI worked with prior to the pandemic, only around 48 have returned. "That's industry-wide, any type of gym is desperate for trainers," Polson said. Silver Linings Even with the Omicron variant sowing uncertainty, New Year's resolutions—combined with pandemic fatigue—may still give local gyms a boost. The first two months of the calendar can account for up to 25% of a gym's annual revenue, according to Karraker. "That's when we see people buying 10 and 20 personal training credits versus five or one," Karraker said. A key aspect driving the return of Karraker's business has been the return of "hardcore" gym-goers who work out at least three times a week. While these customers have always made up a majority of his gym's revenue, particularly in the personal training segment, they have been especially critical to getting his business back on its feet after the shutdowns. Karraker added that the experience of the pandemic has led to increasing awareness of personal health among the larger population, which—paired with the cabin fever resulting from the pandemic—has led to gyms functioning as a much-needed outlet. "The hardcore folks came back hard, they wanted to get back in the gym and lift heavy things. They were tired of working out with bands at home," Karraker said. He added that his gym has started to see record levels of interest, but has had to turn away prospective customers because of a lack of available trainers. And the curveballs keep coming: California imposed a statewide mask mandate on Dec. 15, but one day later said San Francisco could keep its exemptions for fully vaccinated people in gyms and offices. On Dec. 29, the city reversed its prior reversal and reinstated a universal masking policy. Eriksen said around 30 customers put their memberships on hold since the latest mask mandate came down. But Karraker thinks San Francisco's extremely health-conscious population will hold up the industry in the long run. "If I was in Bakersfield or Riverside, I would not feel optimistic," Karraker said. "But we're here in San Francisco with a super high vaccination rate. I've attended three holiday parties that requested a COVID test before you attended. That's not happening in much of the U.S. where you need to show a negative test before having some eggnog." Kevin Truong can be reached at .

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