

# Tampa gym scene changes but emerges stronger than ever

Patty Ryan - Tampa Bay Times

Jan 12, 2013



Resolutions carried a little extra baggage this year, beyond the usual paunches. • Among 2013's weighty topics: Which gym? • The workout world changed in 2012 after giant LA Fitness gobbled up Lifestyle Family Fitness. Some people got bumped out of comfort zones. • The new owner eliminated a popular line of group fitness programs, offending some clients. But LA Fitness also built five new clubs from the ground up, in New Tampa, Carrollwood, Brandon, Valrico and South Tampa — the latter, a two-story facility with the square footage of a grocery store. • The Lifestyle sale wasn't the year's only gym shakeup. Choice Fitness abandoned the Howard Avenue gym that adult-business owner Joe Redner once opened as Xtreme. The closure left South Tampa without a cult favorite that had long drawn serious bodybuilders.

The disgruntled from Lifestyle and the displaced from Choice found new footing at Powerhouse Gym in downtown Tampa, land of 200-pound dumbbells, steam rooms, tanning, towel service, boxing, Krav Maga, yoga, Pilates, cycling, hydromassage, a sand pit, rock climbing wall and stadium stairs.

Other choices were brewing, too. Boutique fitness studios popped up all over the city and county. There seemed to be a mini-gym on every corner, bringing yoga, Pilates, boxing, CrossFit and cycling.

Even Jazzercise — founded the year the Beatles

released Yellow Submarine — got big ideas, launching plans for a new center in Riverview that will open in two months.

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Tomas "Blue" Yake, 28, who began power lifting in the eighth grade, belongs to two gyms.

When LA Fitness bought his Lifestyle in the Northdale area, Yake kept his bargain rate, about \$25 a month, he said. That gym closed, and the company sent members to a Lutz location.

He likes the equipment at LA Fitness but wishes the gym had longer weekend hours. His schedule is tight. He's a Hillsborough Community College nursing student who works weekends at an Office Depot until 6:30 p.m. LA Fitness closes at 8 p.m.

So he pays \$20 a month for 24-hour access to a Calta's in North Tampa.

"I love Calta's because I can go any time I want and it's not crowded," he said.

He's considering joining the new South Tampa LA Fitness because it's close to his Office Depot store. That would make working out less of a scramble.

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It's one of the company's Signature facilities, meaning higher fees but more amenities. Along with cardio machines, weight training equipment, personal training, cycling and other group fitness classes, it has a pool, spa, sauna, towel service, racquetball, basketball and child care.

The website shows memberships at that Signature location starting at \$54.99, compared with \$39.99 at regular LA Fitness gyms. A spokeswoman said potential customers should call the gym to inquire about rates because they often change.

Bill Horner, senior vice president and chief real estate officer, says the LA Fitness gyms provide the best value in the business.

When members arrive to the new South Tampa location, they'll find ample parking, nearly 100 pieces of cardio equipment and a club with something for everyone, he notes.

"You can try everything," he said. "You don't get bored. Maybe you haven't played basketball in a while; you get to play basketball, or do laps in the pool. You can mix up your workouts."

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Name a gym, and there's a good chance Conna Chillura, 43, has been there.

Days, she works for USAmeriBank. She's the daughter of architect and politician Joe Chillura. She's also a personal trainer who teaches cycling classes. And she works out. Where? The answer varies from day to day.

She pays for a membership to LA Fitness. The S Dale Mabry club is near her home. Even before Saturday's grand opening, she had worked out there about a dozen times.

But she also took a class not long ago at Orangetheory Fitness with a co-worker, and another class at Shapes with her mother. Powerhouse Gym? She has been there, too.

She teaches a cycling class and a boot camp at the Performance Compound, a facility that targets pro athletes but also sells memberships to the public. That's where she usually lifts weights.

Formerly the Fight Factory, it's a hybrid training camp. When ongoing renovations are complete, a boxing ring is expected to take shape. Members pay \$65 a month for gym access and unlimited classes. There are three a day, on the order of lower-body Mondays, speed and agility Tuesdays, upper-body Wednesdays.

"The members we have here, these people don't mess around," said staff member Tom Cardinale. "They come here and want to be beaten up for an hour. They want to be pushed. The majority of the people we have are serious about being here. We don't have any lollygaggers."

Get up early enough this time of year and you might see Derek Jeter, Ryan Howard or B.J. Upton. All three were there on Friday.

"I spend most of my time at the Compound," Chillura says, "just because I have a couple of people I train there and my class is there and I like it."

"You go in and people are sweating and working hard and lifting weights. It just feels good."

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Chillura still misses the old Xtreme, where she worked as a trainer for years.

“It was like family,” she said.

And Yake, the HCC student, misses his old Lifestyle.

“It was like home,” he said.

It’s one factor that gym owners can’t always plot: loyalty, and the decisions that erode it.

The Choice closure and the Lifestyle sale turned out to be a boon to Powerhouse Gym, a 40,000-square-foot facility in the Channel District with memberships starting at \$39.

John Sanguinetti, one of the owners, saw an enrollment bump of 12 to 15 percent, he said.

Powerhouse offered the Les Mills cardio programs that some former Lifestyle members missed. It also had longer hours than LA Fitness: 5 a.m. to midnight weekdays and 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. weekends.

That’s how it works. A gym can spend millions on concrete and equipment, only to have a small exodus occur when a trainer leaves or a program changes.

“I get the passion of it,” LA Fitness executive Horner said. “It’s not intentional to go in and change things willy-nilly. We try to learn what’s important and what we can fit in.”

The company loves the reception it’s getting in the Tampa Bay market, Horner said. He sees opportunities for five to 12 new gyms just in Hillsborough and Pinellas counties.

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In a way, Elizabeth West, a regional director for Jazzercise, knows all about the art of keeping people.

Someone once told her: Never fear competition. Fear an industry with little competition because it means the industry is going away.

The Tampa Bay area is the state’s highest-grossing Jazzercise district, she said. The South Tampa center alone offers 48 classes a week. There are centers in Westchase, Carrollwood and Lutz. The new one will be on Bloomingdale Avenue.

Even after all these years, class leaders still stand with their backs to participants so that it’s easier to follow cues and no one gets left behind.

In her mind, it is one key to the success of Jazzercise.

“You want to feel like you know what you’re doing,” she said, “and you want to feel like you belong.”

Staff writer Jimmy Geurts contributed to this report. Patty Ryan can be reached at [pryan@tampabay.com](mailto:pryan@tampabay.com) or (813) 226-3382.

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### Things to consider

- A free trial. Most gyms offer free introductory passes, meaning one could float from gym to gym for weeks. Tampa area YMCAs allow three free visits a year. The three-day LA Fitness pass is good for two people. Anytime Fitness has a free one-week pass, upgradable to two weeks if accessed through a social network.
- Your work hours, especially if you work on weekends. Some gyms have limited hours on Saturday and Sunday; others never close. Will you have time to exercise?
- Your social needs. A busy gym can be a curse or a blessing. Some people thrive on the buzz of activity. Others want to get in and out without waiting to run on a treadmill or do squats on a Smith machine.
- The fluctuating crowd. Before signing a contract, visit the gym at the time of day you will most likely work out, to see whether people must wait to use equipment or if they are crowded out of group classes. (While you're there, look for broken equipment, and back away if you see too much of it.)
- Your budget. No-frills gyms start at \$10 a month. You may pay more for 24-hour access. You'll definitely pay more for a gym with full amenities — typically \$40 to \$60.
- Your passions. If you know that yoga is your thing, there are plenty of yoga studios. Likewise for Pilates or stationary cycling. Unsure? Larger gyms offer an introduction to many different forms of exercise under the same roof, along with amenities like towel service and racquetball.
- Your level of expertise. If you already know how to use gym equipment, you'll make good use of a \$10 gym membership. But a novice may be better off at a club where instruction is available.
- Personal trainer policy. Some clubs allow you to bring in your own trainer. Many do not.