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Men's Only Fitness Center Helps Shy Guys Shape Up

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When 59-year-old Ed Naugin of Kenilworth, N.J., was in the market for a gym membership to get back in shape and improve his cardiovascular health, his first stop wasn't a Gold's Gym or even Bally's—instead, he headed to his wife's gym, the local Curves for Women franchise.

Naugin's wife had been steadily losing weight and loving the supportive community at her ladies-only gym, so one day, she convinced the manager to allow her husband to test drive Curves' 30-minute circuit.

Only problem: Naugin wasn't looking for curves. If anything, he was looking to trim down and reveal a more "cut" physique, and the equipment was all tailored to a woman's smaller frame.

"I thought to myself, 'I wish there was something like this for me,'" said Naugin.

Turns out, there was.

It's called Cuts Fitness for Men, and it is the brainchild of John Gennaro, a 25-year fitness industry veteran who dreamed up the Cuts concept while witnessing the explosion of women-only fitness centers throughout the 1990's.

While the women who flock to female fitness centers might argue that the Golds and Bally's of the world are men's gyms, Gennaro, 51, became convinced that there was a population of men who were also looking for a more supportive workout atmosphere and approach than what was available at a traditional health club—the "type of men, like women, who haven't been in a gym in a while and would feel intimidated going back to the New York Sports Club, the Ballys of the world," Gennaro said.

Gennaro, the infomercial guru who created Abs on Air, was also pretty sure he knew a hot business opportunity when he saw it.

Launched about 10 years ago, Curves for Women is now the largest fitness franchise in the world, with over 9,000 locations and 4 million members around the globe. Curves attributes its success to their time-saving 30-minute circuit training workout, and their supportive, women-only environment—factors that are particularly appealing to aging baby boomers.

The launch of Curves, however, also coincided with a huge boom in the health club industry—126 percent between 1995 and 2005—spurred at least in part, industry experts say, by a growth in facilities catering to specialty populations.

“I watched as the Curves of the world, the Ladies Fitness of Americas grew in popularity and wondered why no one was doing this for men,” Gennaro said. He opened the first “Cuts” in Clark, N.J. in May 2003. Since then, more than 200 franchises have been sold in 32 states and five countries stretching from Ireland to Guatemala. Cuts was named one of the top 20 franchises for 2006 by Entrepreneur Magazine, and though it has yet to achieve the prominence of Curves, it appears to be well on its way to creating a new paradigm for men’s gyms.

“The average [Cuts] member is in his 40s, married,” said Cuts Managing Director Steven Haase. “He’s not looking to pick up a chick—those days of the 80s aren’t going to happen. He has a couple kids and he’s trying to squeeze in 30 minutes to lose that 10–20 pounds he gained in the last few years.”

“People over the age of 55 represent the highest growing demographic of health club members—a quarter of the population,” said International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association spokeswoman Rosemary Lavery. “So the demographics of health clubs are changing. It’s not a meet market anymore. People are going there to get in shape. [And] a very large group of people in the range of 30 to 55 years of age are not body building; they’re trying to get in shape.”

The American Heart Association estimates that

90 percent of the population still doesn’t exercise—meaning that Cuts could potentially appeal to a market of 80 million men in the 16 to 64 age range in the United States alone.

Signature Workout

In addition to single-gender exclusivity, Cuts also models Curves in its paired down facility and affordability. The typical Cuts is just 1,500–2,000 square feet, half the size of most health clubs, and because running such a small space without perks like showers and saunas requires minimum staffing and overhead, a Cuts membership costs just \$39 a month.

But it’s the signature workout—a 30 minute circuit training session on machines tailored specifically for either their male or female membership that is the key to these clubs capturing their niche market.

“People my age don’t want big muscles,” said Naugin, who promptly joined the flagship Cuts when his wife



discovered it in nearby Clark. “We want to come in quick, and get back home before the wife yells at you.”

The full-body workout offered at Cuts consists of 16 different stations of various stacked weights, hydraulics, abdominal workouts, and cardio workouts, with each stop lasting just 40 seconds, all designed for maximum fat burning for those looking for the most bang for their workout.

“You work at 75 to 85 percent of your maximum heart,” says Gennaro. “Your heart rate never drops. You want to maximize as much as you can.”



Louisa Choochee
Don Smith, 32, crunches his abdominal muscles at Cuts Fitness For Men franchise in Clark, N.J.

A voice recording prompts members to check their heart rate about every 10 minutes and a facilitator, be it the gym’s manager or the owner, is on the floor at all times to provide guidance.

“I originally joined Cuts to improve my cardio fitness

and endurance,” said Cuts member Peter Alfano. “I had to find a way to get in shape so I can keep up with running around with my grandchildren.”

Circuit training is hardly a new approach to fitness and many traditional gyms have installed circuit training corners in their facilities for members who want an express workout. What Cuts offers men is an alternative to the traditional gym environment that has kept many aging or out of shape men from jumping on the exercise bandwagon.

“In some cases, those members that use the circuit within their gyms are perceived as ‘weak’ or not able to work out with the ‘real men,’ using ‘real equipment,’” said Gennaro. At Cuts, there is no stigma, because image means nothing. There are not even mirrors on the walls.

“The product that our members find attractive is a quick, effective workout in a comfortable environment. There are no ‘muscle heads’ in our gyms and it’s very relationship-oriented,” said Haase. “It’s similar to Cheers where everyone does know your name which goes against the grain of most traditional gyms,” says Haase.

Health and fitness are not popular topics with men, and in surveying the men’s market, Gennaro and Haase, who has a background in education, saw an even larger void in the health and fitness education geared toward men. They also saw the Cuts concept as an opportunity to fill that gap.

“We firmly believe that a significant reason that approximately 90 percent of men are not exercising and leading health lifestyles is because they have not been truly educated on the topic,” said Gennaro.

In April, Haase and Gennaro took another step in the Curves direction and signed a book deal to create a Cuts exercise and lifestyle book to be released in 2007 with the publishers of the wildly successful Curves books. They are also developing an online “virtual university” that will offer 10-12 courses on health and fitness, geared toward men and tied to the Cuts books.

It Takes All Types

While Cuts is proudly succeeding in the Curves for Men model, perhaps the strongest indicator of the muscle in the men's only fitness market is the diversification already occurring in that sector.

Two months before Cuts launched in New Jersey, Al Ocasio opened the first Blitz gym in March 2003. Blitz bills itself as the first mens-only gym to offer a 20-minute circuit workout, but also goes to great lengths to make it clear that they are, if anything, the anti-Curves, positioning itself as a sanctuary for men who want extra attitude and testosterone in their fitness regime.

With a logo featuring a muscle-head holding a barbell in one hand and a boxing glove on the other, the Blitz web site displays a quote by a Dr. Raymond Thomas, M.D. saying, "The Blitz is for real men. Unlike others, it's not a copy of a women's gym disguised as a Men's club. No bouncy boards or sissy bikes here."

The Blitz circuit includes boxing and martial arts. When asked if he modeled The Blitz on Curves, Ocasio offers an emphatic "No." Another company called Scrimmage seems to be competing more in the Blitz market than Cuts.

But as the gloves come off in the fight for the male fitness consumer, some fitness experts question whether an exercise regime limited to a 20 or 30 minute circuit workout provides meaningful health benefits.

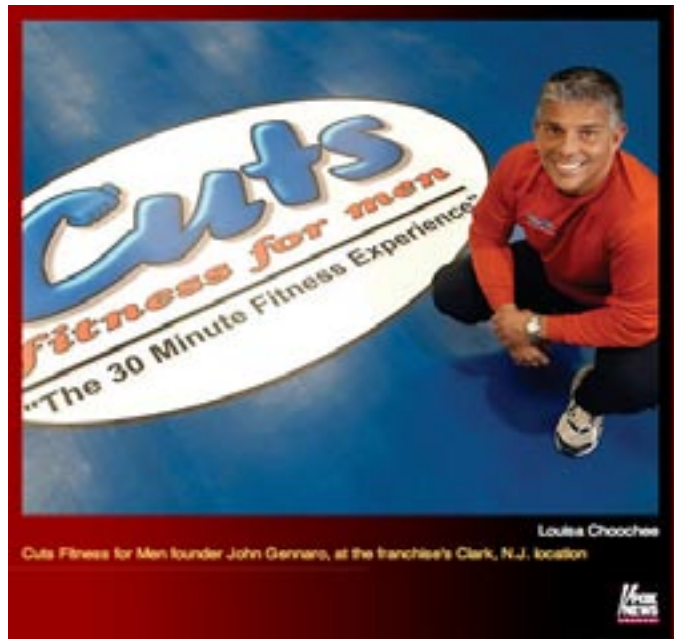
"The only thing with Cuts is that it's a circuit-based program," says IDEA Health & Fitness personal training expert Justin Price. "Being quick and fast-paced, the exercises may lack intention of movement. The exercises are probably goal-orientated, but not task orientated."

In other words, circuit training is a great way to get your heart rate up and burn calories, but it may have a tendency to exacerbate your body's imbalances, leading to aches and pains over the long haul.

But don't tell that to Ed Naugin. Since joining Cuts in January, Naugin has lost 22 pounds. His waist went from a 38

to a 34 and his body fat dropped from 26.9 percent to 21.7 percent.

"What we're doing is very, very different than what the industry has done through the present," said Haase. "We are educating men about why they should be exercising. Your average gym doesn't have a wellness angle."



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