

# COVID is Making Gyms Sweat it Out

by

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Belding Performance, a small gym situated in the corner of a three-store strip mall, in Hauppauge, New York, specializes in the training of athletes across multiple sports. In the back of the gym is a 7 by 10 foot cinder block wall painted black and outlined by two by fours. On this wall, in silver Sharpie, are goals written down by the athletes who walk through the door.

“I like having athletes write their specific goals down because they are more likely to take the necessary actions to achieve them,” says gym owner Adam Belding. “It adds accountability as well.”

There is one goal written however, that is not from an athlete, but rather from Belding himself. “Never fill out another resume.” The goal was put to the test this year when Belding Performance was forced to close its doors because of the pandemic.

At 8 p.m. on March 16, 2020, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo issued the official shutdown of gyms across New York state. The order would not be reversed until five months later on August 26.

On July 31 a rally was held in New York City to promote the reopening of gyms. Gym owners wanted their gyms to open as quickly as possible and went to great lengths to show their displeasure.

With no clients and no income, Belding had to do everything necessary to keep his gym breathing. “I took out a loan just to keep the gym going,” said Belding. “It was a tough spot, but it was a risk I had to take.” During the shutdown Belding was still visiting his gym every day. He would clean and do workouts himself. “I just wanted to do everything I could to stay ready to open and keep myself occupied.”

The shutdown was strictly enforced. One day, Hauppauge’s fire marshall pulled up to Belding Performance, while Belding was alone in the gym cleaning his equipment. He asked

Belding if he could take a look around to make sure it was just him there. “That really showed me how serious people were taking this,” said Belding. “If someone had been there, I could have been fined or shut down.”

## Gyms Begin

According to an article by ClubReady, gyms date back to ancient Greece as a place for athletes to train for the Olympic games. Fitness was also a part of the philosophy of the Greeks alongside education. Gyms faded along with the downfall of the Greek empire, and would not show back up until the 19th century.

The first commercial gym came out of France in the 1840’s. By the mid 19th century, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) was offering youth the chance to develop a healthy “body, mind and spirit” in London. Fitness club chains became really popular with the help of women during the 1960’s. In 1983 and 1984 24 Hour Fitness and LA Fitness opened their first gyms and have become two of America’s most popular gym chains.

More recently, the 1990’s and early 2000’s witnessed a resurgence of smaller gyms and personal training facilities. They did really well, becoming very popular very quickly, until COVID hit.

## The Covid Effect

Although gyms have since been allowed to open, some gyms didn’t make it to the August reopening date. Some gyms did make it, but couldn’t open because of restrictions and are still fighting. Many owners are not happy with the way in which Governor Cuomo handled the shutdown of gyms and how long it took for him to allow them to re-open.

A class-action lawsuit has been filed against the State of New York for not permitting the opening of gyms sooner. Roughly 3,000 owners came together to file over lost wages and revenue, with the total suit coming in at around \$500 million dollars. The suit, filed on July 9 by attorney James Mermigis, argues, “As a free people, we have the unalienable right to pursue happiness, which includes the freedom to make our own choices about our safety and welfare without unconstitutional interference. In the face of the coronavirus, it means the freedom to choose whether to stay at home, or to keep calm and carry on with the things that make life worth living.”

Tensions ran high during the lawsuit period when movie theaters and bowling alleys were allowed to open before gyms. Owners were sending the governor safety plans to open their gyms and he kept rejecting them. It was not until Aug. 14, where he announced the state would release protocols for gyms to open.

When gyms were allowed to open they had to follow strict guidelines including operating at 33% capacity, having proper ventilation and air filtration systems, and requiring occupants to wear masks. The guidelines call for MERV-13 filters, which the Department of Energy defines as a type of pleated mechanical air filter that can theoretically remove at least 99.97% of dust, pollen, mold, bacteria, and any airborne particles with a size of 0.3 microns.

These rules aimed to keep people safe, but some gyms were not able to meet the stringent requirements.

Jen Keenan-Stryska is the owner of Fitness on Main Street in Farmingdale, New York. Prior to COVID she worked at 2 fitness clubs. “The first one closed and the second had no work,” said Keenan-Stryska. “So I made Covid lemonade and opened a studio mid pandemic!” She holds both in-person and Zoom classes ranging from yoga to boxing to strength training.

Mong Phu owns a martial arts gym in North Rose, New York near Syracuse. “I’m teaching knowledge to my clients,” said Phu. “I’m more people oriented; I don’t think we should be put in the same group as a regular gym.” Phu’s gym is his main source of income, but he is one of the gyms that has not been able to open even under the COVID guidelines. “All of my students are gone,” said Phu. “I don’t want to wear a mask and I don’t want to social distance. I can’t teach like that.” In the meantime, to get by, he sells books out of a room above his gym on eBay.

## Operating Out of a Home

Some gyms were not affected by Cuomo’s decision because they operate out of the homes of their owners.

Lisa Brown Holland lives in Perth, New York, a small town 40 minutes north of Albany. She has been training clients for 20 years and has been on her own for seven.

“We built a garage-style structure for the sole purpose of being a gym,” said Holland. “If I didn’t own the building, I would not have survived paying rent somewhere.” Holland runs a studio on her property and does classes only. She was making do with holding outside classes because she still respected the guidelines, but didn’t take them as a reason to stop.

Rhonda Markman teaches exercise classes and does personal training inside her Hartsdale home. Operating out of a studio gym in her house, Markman allows one person in at a time to train. She also holds sessions over Zoom, but those are a little less popular with her. “I feel like I’ve lost the ability to be an intuitive trainer,” said Markman. “It’s made me feel flat.” Wanting to be able to read a person’s body language and see past their words has been taken away by Zoom.

## Combating COVID

Gym owners have implemented diligent cleaning protocols, based on the department of health's guidelines and for their own piece of mind.

"The days of back-to-back people? Gone," said Markman. "Any equipment that gets used, I line up and hit it with a disinfecting spray, and then leave the room for 15 minutes before the next person comes." While she trains a client in person, she leaves the room's windows and doors open to circulate air, and both she and the client wear a mask.

Belding Performance has similar protocols. Before stepping foot in the gym, a client must fill out a survey. It asks about possible COVID exposure to help track the people coming and going. Belding requires each client to carry around a towel and spray bottle so any equipment used can be wiped down as soon as it's done being used. He limits each session to five people and keeps each session to an hour so he can take 15 minutes to spray down the entire gym.

A gym can only be as successful as its clients allow it to be, the owners say. If the members do not follow the correct protocols and there is a positive case that shows up, that puts all the members--and the gym's ability to stay open--in total jeopardy.

Chris and Rob Burns are clients at Belding Performance. "I feel safe at the gym," said Chris Burns. "Adam does a good job making sure it's clean and everyone is wiping equipment down." Being in the gym is a big deal for them. The equipment and space allows for a much wider variety of workouts. "We were doing at home workouts with the weights we had," said Rob Burns. "They weren't that heavy and we did a lot of body weight stuff, but we couldn't wait to get back in the gym."

At-home workouts are an option. More cost effective and away from all COVID risks, but gym members wanted to be back as soon as possible. “Five months wasn’t necessary,” said Chris Burns. “A month or two was understandable because we had no clue what this was, but gyms have shown they were able do a good job tackling the problem.”

Another client at Belding Performance, Noah Wild, was also happy to see gyms get back up and running. “I would run and workout at home, but going to the gym is completely different,” said Wild. “The gym is an escape, a place to clear your mind and better yourself.” Many gym members use their gyms and workouts as stress relievers. Being trapped in a home for so long puts a test on the mind.

Wild agrees the guidelines in gyms are good and helping to keep people safe. “I also workout at Planet Fitness and even there I see people following guidelines and wiping equipment,” said Wild. “I feel the five months was a bit excessive.”

From the beginning of September through the end of November, gyms have shown to be a pretty safe place, only accounting for 0.06% of new COVID cases, according to the New York Department of Health.

## Government Effect

On December 23, 2020 the New York Supreme Court ruled in favor of Athletes Unleashed, a gym in Orchard Park that had sued the state. Judge Paul B. Wojtaszek allowed for the gym to operate at full capacity with the proper maintenance of social distancing protocols. This came after finding that gyms were not major contributors to COVID numbers. The judge also ruled that New York Executive Law 29a--the law used to authorize the governor’s COVID-19 executive orders - placed a 30-day limit on the directive.

Gov. Cuomo took a lot of heat for the decisions he has made regarding the pandemic, but his supporters say they are very respectable decisions given how little was known about the novel coronavirus.

Jody Krause Francis has felt the effects of the Governor's decisions. She has been in the medical field ever since she was a child, reading X-rays in her father's veterinarian office. She has a degree in sports medicine and has worked for semi-pro football teams, Olympic teams, and national volleyball teams. Her dream though was to open a gym.

Like Belding, she owned a small gym in Palmyra, New York, between Rochester and Syracuse, with the desire to make connections with her clients. She opened her gym in 2007 while she was being treated for cancer. "I had over 100 members before I even opened the doors," said Francis. "It paid its own bills in the second month of operation." Over the next 12 years the gym was thriving all while Francis battled two more diagnoses of cancer. "The first two months of 2020 were the best in about eight years," said Francis. "Then boom." Just like that COVID hit and she could not keep up the gym's rent and was forced to close permanently.

Francis believes a five-month closure was too unreasonable and a month to flatten the curve would have been better. She currently works in a physical therapy office and says the restrictions in her office are far more laid back than those implemented for gyms. "Other states proved a long closure was unnecessary," said Francis.

## Big Gyms

Commercial gyms have had to devise more intricate plans to stay open and keep members safe. Blink Fitness has locations in Syracuse, Rochester, Westchester, Long Island, and New York City. Each location, except the New York City ones, was able to open Aug. 24, while



New York City gyms had to wait until Sept. 2. They all have abbreviated hours in order to limit exposure and to allow for disinfecting, as well as requiring members to sanitize equipment before and after each use.

For a gym like Crunch Fitness in Brooklyn, with a 20,000-square-foot space, their max capacity will be 107 occupants as opposed to their usual capacity of over 300. Gyms that are in deep holes will struggle to come back when they cannot have their max income because of occupant limits. Crunch had to lay off 3,000 employees and has been in talks with their landlord to work out the rent owed during the lockdown that they will have trouble paying back.

Mike Arteaga's is a commercial gym with two locations in Highland, New York. Opened in 1973, the global pandemic isn't the first crisis the gym has gone through. "We survived the IBM downsize in the 90's and the recession in '09," said Kerri Palermo, CFO of Mike Arteaga's. "Those financial downfalls helped our team to better prepare and save for the future." Smaller gyms may not have had all this time and experience to know to have a safety net prepared, while a bigger gym has more resources readily available to them.

When they shut down on March 16, the staff at Mike Arteaga's didn't expect to not open its doors until Aug. 31. During the shutdown they did everything they could to be ready for that day. "We stocked up on disinfectant and adjusted the building to comply with the six feet guidelines," said Palermo. "Every staff member is required to clean. There is a checklist we go through when we clean the machines every two hours." Palermo believes the guidelines do a great job keeping people safe even though people may be tired of hearing them.

## Did Gyms Deserve a Shutdown?

Venues like restaurants and bars can be pointed at as bigger culprits for a rise in the virus. According to state-wide contact tracing, since the opening of gyms, restaurants have accounted for 1.46% of infection rates as opposed to gyms .06%. Masks cannot be worn when eating or drinking, but they can be worn while working out. Studies have shown gyms and fitness centers are typically lower risk. The state of New York made a mistake shutting down gyms for this long and putting a lot of businesses at jeopardy. It may not be for a few years that we realize the damage, but it surely will be felt.

Restaurants and bars were allowed to open in Phase 3 of the reopening plan. Meanwhile, gyms were outcast to Phase 4 because they were viewed as non-essential. When a surge of cases hit the United States in June, gyms were taken out of Phase 4 and would have to wait till the governor felt it was safe for them to open.

Some gyms tried to open earlier and were ordered to cease and desist letters like Clublife in Kinderhook, New York. The owner of Clublife was also given an appearance ticket for violating the order and the public health law.

Gym supporters argue the “non-essential label” is very inaccurate. The United States has been battling obesity for years. Health and Fitness were part of the mission of former First Lady Michelle Obama. People not having access to gyms has created a weight-gain problem. According to a New York Times article, a small study done through bluetooth enabled scales shows during quarantine, adults were gaining roughly  $\frac{1}{2}$  a pound every 10 days. Translating to roughly  $1 \frac{1}{2}$  additional pounds a month. Not everyone has workout equipment in their house either so this only compounds the problem.

Where Are We Now?

On Dec. 11, 2020, the FDA approved Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccination for emergency use in the United States. Since then, two more vaccines have come out to the public. With more and more people receiving the vaccine, the regulations in gyms have begun to relax further.

On April 26, 2021, Governor Cuomo came out with a decision to allow for 50 percent capacity of gyms, starting May 15. "This has raised awareness that gyms need to be clean," said Belding, hearing about the decision. "Schools don't have to do this, restaurants don't have to do this. Gyms have definitely been neglected."

A grading system like they give to restaurants would probably benefit gyms and the upkeep and making sure clients are as safe as possible, Belding added.

"I don't think gyms are going to be non-existent," he said. "I think people will get tired of working out at home and not being around people."

**Interview Log**

Adam Belding, owner of Belding Performance in Hauppauge, NY

Jen Keenan-Stryka, owner of Fitness on Main Street in Farmingdale, NY

Mong Phu, owner of a martial arts studio in North Rose, NY

Lisa Brown Holland, owner of a personal fitness studio in Perth, NY

Rhonda Markman, teaches fitness classes in her house in Scarsdale, NY

Chris Burns, client at Belding Performance

Rob Burns, client at Belding Performance

Noah Wild, client at Belding Performance

Jody Krause Francis, physical therapist and former gym owner

Kerri Palermo, CFO of Mike Artega's in Highland, NY

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