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A pandemic revolution for workout devotees, their instructors, and the gyms they used to frequent Pelotons decorate homes, instructors find income on Zoom, and gyms face a bleak future

Long before the coronavirus pandemic, Madelyn McHugh's husband wanted a Peloton. She did not.

"I was firm that I was someone who needed to leave my home to exercise. It just didn't make sense to buy something we weren't going to use frequently," she said. Her usual routine was classes at Pure Barre, while her husband went to F45.

But after ACL surgery in March, McHugh's physical therapist recommended she recover on a stationary bike. By March 22, all non-essential businesses in NYC were shut down, including gyms. So she and her husband bought a Peloton.

It used to be that going to the gym was the epitome of health - taking time out of your day to stretch, run, and crunch away stress. But the coronavirus has made this a selfish, even narcissistic, act. It has forced consumers to bring the gym into their living rooms. Now that many Americans have adapted to workouts without the gym, yoga studio, or spin class, it's hard to imagine that we will return to our previous gym routines. The coronavirus won't be the death of gyms, but it has permanently changed the industry.

As days turned to months, demand for at-home fitness equipment rose. At one point, it was impossible to get a set of dumbbells delivered in New York City. Gyms started [renting out](#) kettlebells. Bikes were on back-order. Peloton and Lululemon sales soared.

"There have been two approaches to the at-home workout," says Dr. Natalia Mehlman-Petrzela, culture historian at the New School. "There are those who have means to invest in hardware and software, like a Peloton, or paying for a personal trainer; and then there are those who flocked back to low-tech exercise, like running, biking, or tennis."

"The Peloton is now the gym."

A Peloton stationary bike is the hot commodity of the pandemic. Analysts estimate that the company will close the fiscal year ending June 2021 with \$3.94 billion in total revenue, more than double this year's \$1.83 billion. They also expect sales to increase next year by another 32% to an estimated total revenue of \$5.22 billion.

Peloton also saw increases in its digital subscriptions, reporting 1.09 million connected fitness subscribers (those with the classes connected to their Peloton), again about double the 511,000 it reported in 2019. Investors are glad to see it - the company's stock is trading around \$161, surpassing its previous all-time high of \$131 in October of this year.

Perhaps an even more telling number? Peloton's connected member monthly churn of 0.75%. Once folks sign up for Peloton, they stick with it. "It's hard for a competitor to displace a \$2,000 bike once it's in the home," says Laura Martin, an analyst at Needham and Company.

When the seriousness of the pandemic set in, McHugh and her husband sprang for a Peloton using a discount through her husband's employer.

"It's made me change the way I think about working out at home," McHugh says. "I've made sure there are designated areas for certain tasks. The Peloton is now the gym."

She says she enjoys doing a 30 minute ride at lunch, and that she feels more alert and productive afterwards. When her office reopens, she doesn't think she'll go in five days a week, but would opt to work from home a few times a week in order to keep the workout break.

McHugh was lucky to have ordered her bike early in the pandemic. Peloton is now struggling with meeting delivery times. Customers complain about being given short notice for delivery windows, or deliveries not arriving at all. Peloton sent out an email saying that there wouldn't be any Black Friday or other holiday deals in order not to further stress its supply chain.

Some consumers looking to avoid the shipping delays have turned to online marketplaces. A national "buy, sell, trade" Peloton Facebook group sees about a post a day. Folks looking to sell are either moving and don't want to bring the bike, or have upgraded to the new Bike + and are looking to sell their old one.

At the other end of the spectrum is a surge in low-cost or free workouts.

Julia Murray, 28, turned to classes on YouTube. "I did several 30-day yoga challenges through the 'Yoga with Adriene' YouTube channel," she said. If she wanted something more intense, she would visit running trails in her neighborhood, or look up Zumba or step workouts. Her gym offered live group classes via Zoom, but the times didn't work for her schedule.

Her most fun form of exercise came after finding the Instagram accounts of women on quad skates, like Oumi Janta. Murray and her roommates all bought a pair. They practice in a freshly paved parking lot near their home. "It's very hard and definitely a workout," she says.

"I never thought I would teach online."

Zoom and Instagram Live have become lifelines for instructors suddenly without a place to earn a living.

Before the pandemic, Erica Bornstein, a veteran yoga instructor based in Boston, was running around the city to teach at five studios. “I was constantly on the train or in my car,” she says.

The day yoga studios closed in March, Bornstein took to Instagram Live. She had about 1,500 Instagram followers and 170 people tuned in. “It was folks who practiced with me in the Boston area, but it was also people who took my class years ago and had to move.” She set up a schedule to keep teaching on Instagram and shared her Venmo for folks to donate when they could.

“I never imagined I would teach online, I’m not tech savvy,” says Bornstein.

Bornstein and her husband have since moved to a new home outside Boston, which gave her more space to make videos that she posts for sale on her website. Classes are \$15 each or \$36 for a 4-pack, and buyers can keep the videos once purchased. Bornstein estimates that she sells 80-100 classes per month, meaning she makes around \$2800 to \$3600 a month. She also offers live classes via Zoom and Instagram Live.

“My students and friends have said that they love the convenience of the videos,” she says. “However, I know people miss the real connections of being in a studio. Being in a packed yoga studio was fun! But now we’re all scared of germs.”

She believes people will go back to in-person classes, but they will still want the on-demand option, if nothing else to cut down on commuting times. Someone who was usually in the studio five days a week, may decide to only go in-person three times, and stay home for two using videos.

For some fitness professionals, the closures meant a time to rest. Ariel Padilla is an instructor at NYC-based SoulCycle. He started working at the front desk in order to afford classes, and was encouraged to become an instructor. Before the pandemic, he was teaching an average of 14 classes a week.

“I think some of us who work in fitness don’t realize how abusive we can be to our bodies,” Padilla says. “It can be hard to say no to teaching another class, especially when clients really like you. And it’s just 45 minutes of work for good pay.”

Padilla says he enjoyed having the time to pause, but recognizes that he is lucky. As a more senior instructor, his company tenure helped him. He teaches Soul Cycle classes on the Variis platform, the app on which the company’s classes are streamed.

In the time off, Padilla decided to teach his own fitness classes twice a week on Zoom, called Werqout. Like with Bornstein, the lockdowns became an inadvertent way of seeing how strong his following was outside of the studio.

Bornstein has over 5,200 followers on Instagram now. Padilla says that his classes average 15-30 people.

“I miss the consistency of my teaching schedule,” Padilla says. “But I’m really proud of my classes. They’re something I created and can control.”

Dead Gyms and Deadlifts

On-demand and online platforms will maintain a stronger following since so many gyms across the country have permanently closed. According to a September report by [Yelp](#), over 2,600 gyms that were open on March 1 were now listed as “Permanently closed.”

As the pandemic drags on, that number will increase. Several [major fitness companies](#) have had to file for Chapter 7 and Chapter 11 bankruptcy due to the virus, including Cyc Fitness, YogaWorks, 24 Hour Fitness, and Town Sports International (the parent company of New York Sports Clubs)

According to a [report](#) by the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association, 95% of the 1,170 people surveyed said that they missed at least one aspect of physically being at the gym, with 54% saying that their at-home workout wasn’t as challenging as their regular gym routine. Still, 77% said they have more time to exercise now, be it walking the dog, going for a run, or streaming online classes.

One group of gym-goers in particular had more of a challenge adjusting to working out at home. Dr. Katie Hetjmanek, an associate professor of anthropology at Brooklyn College, and her colleague Dr. Cara Ocobock decided to look at mental health and resiliency a few months into lockdowns when their own weight lifting routines were disrupted. They found that weight lifters suffered the most negative impacts of not being able to go to the gym, reporting lower confidence and higher levels of stress.

Since it’s harder for lifters to have the workout equipment they need in their home, they rely on their gym, meaning it hit them hardest when gyms closed, Dr. Hetjmanek explained. “The folks that did the best were people who already had some kind of home practice, be it running, or doing yoga twice a week in their living room.”

It’s possible weight lifters will help some gyms regain customers, but with experts warning that widespread coronavirus vaccines won’t be available, it will be months, if not another year before we return to normal. Even if we can safely go back to studios and gyms, we’ve had so long to form new habits and invest in workout equipment that we’ve found new routines.

Planet Fitness brought in \$464 million in revenues this year, compared to \$688 million in 2019. Analysts estimate that the company could get back to \$686 million in 2021, if gym-goers return.

“When it is safe to go back, some folks will go to the gym for ‘me time’ as a way to get some space from family or roommates,” says Dr. Mehlman-Petrzela. But Mehlmen-Petrzela herself owns a Peloton, and won’t be returning to a gym soon. “I love that I can keep an eye on dinner, and still get in a quick ride. The convenience is a huge value-add.”

McHugh also won’t be a regular gym user. “I could see going to a gym class as a social event when it’s safe,” she says. “I wouldn’t mind meeting friends for an in-person class, and then getting lunch.”

Like many of us, McHugh says the pandemic has given her plenty of time to learn how to motivate herself at home, and to find her exercise routine. And it doesn’t involve a gym.