

Fitness Industry Retirement Plan

By Stephen Wallenfels

John Bos doesn't describe himself—at least his *former* self—as a fitness enthusiast. The admission comes as something of a surprise, considering that he's the owner of a 1,250-square-foot Ladies Workout Express in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts. “I wasn't interested in gym or sports,” the 71-year-old recalls of his high-school days. “I was more interested in plays, chorus, and the marching band.”

It was those interests, in fact, that informed the careers that kept him occupied for so many years—first, in theater management in the 1960s (Judd Hirsch, Danny DiVito, and Morgan Freeman were among the performers with whom he worked), and, later, as a director of performance programming for National Public Radio (NPR) in Washington, D.C. “What you begin doing, and what you wind up doing,” he reflects, “can involve very different paths.”

For Bos, the paths began to diverge in 2000 when he retired and moved to Shelburne Falls, a small town with 2,000 residents in western Massachusetts that's best known for the historic Bridge of Flowers, which spans the Deerfield River. In May, 2001, he participated in the 60-mile Avon Walk for Breast Cancer, in memory of his niece, Margot Bos, who had died from the disease at the age of 38; and later that year, Bos himself was diagnosed with melanoma.

“If you're going to get skin cancer, that's the kind you *don't* want,” he says. The treatment that followed left his body wasted and his spirit drained. That's when he turned to exercise and began a slow, but steady, comeback.

It took a year-and-a-half to achieve a recovery, and, in the process, Bos developed a deep appreciation for the power of exercise. His physical strength improved, and, along with it, came a new enthusiasm for life. “I really had the mind/body connection going strong,” he recalls. “I was grateful for the way that exercise had helped me turn my life around—that was one of the major reasons I became a fitness entrepreneur,” he attests with obvious passion. Then, he quickly adds, “... that and the fact that my IRA funds were less than adequate.” Bos' brother

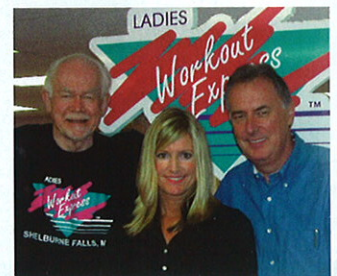
suggested that he purchase a franchise to supplement his retirement funds.

That was in 2004, when the fastest-growing franchise in the country was Subway. Not wanting to get into the fast-food business, Bos noted that the second company on the list was Curves International, Inc. His sister belonged to a Curves, and he knew that she was profiting from the experience, but, more importantly, Bos was impressed with the concept. He liked the idea of providing a safe, nonintimidating exercise environment for women.

“The business model made sense,” he explains, “so I started doing some research.” Part of his investigation involved conversations with the people of Shelburne Falls, who confirmed his suspicion—that there was a real demand for a health club in the town, which, at that time, didn't have one. “The census told me there were 6,500 women between the ages of 24 and 65 in my market,” says Bos. “I figured I needed 200-250 people to make it work, and that seemed doable. I found a good location, and, in August 2004, opened a Ladies Workout Express.”

It's been three years since the grand opening of his club, and, today, Bos is very pleased with the way that things are turning out. He's up to 276 members, half of whom are women from Shelburne Falls, and, at the moment, his biggest challenge is dealing with what he sees as an evolution in the women-only fitness market. “The nature of the women-only circuit is changing,” he observes. “It's expanding, encompassing more fitness alternatives, such as BOSU balls, free weights, rowing machines—leading to what I call the ‘circuit-plus.’” As a result, Bos is suffering what many other successful club operators have had to endure: *growing pains*. But, at 71 years young, these are the sort of twinges that he welcomes with a laugh.

Bos enjoys seeing his parking lot full of cars—it reminds of him of another reason that he's glad to be working in the fitness industry. “I'm giving something important back to the community,” he reflects. “This club makes a lot of women feel good and helps them to be healthy... and, in the final analysis, that's what this business is really all about.” ■



Ladies' man John Bos, l.

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