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By Lori Hinton

# FIT *and* TRIM

*After all these years, the Washington Athletic Club remains one of Seattle's top locations for business and recreation by changing with the times.*

**MORE** and more, health-conscious individuals are seeking a balanced physical and mental fitness experience rather than simply running on treadmills and cranking out "reps."

They're hungry for quality and convenience (in diet and life), a healthy dose of social interaction, alternative methods of stress relief, and interesting ways to work up a good sweat. Ironically, many are taking these progressive steps toward wellness at the city's oldest fitness establishment, the Washington Athletic Club (WAC).



One of the WAC's personal trainers customizes a client's workout program.

### 74 YEARS STRONG

In the 1930s, WAC began in the same 22-story building where it lives today — in the heart of downtown Seattle on Sixth Avenue and Union Street.

"When you've been around for over 70 years in a vertical envelope, you have to be creative with the space," smiles wellness manager Tamela Thomas.

Though the inside of the facility has changed dramatically over the years — updated with state-of-the-art equipment and innovative programs — the historic feeling of a well-established institution is still there. Even the bathrooms feature small WAC accents as subtle reminders to members that they are part of something special, something permanent, and something very Seattle from the start.

In fact, one of the oldest tile pools in the Northwest, the WAC's Helene Madison Pool, was named after the 1930s Seattle swimmer who won three Olympic gold medals after training at the WAC.

"It was her victories that sustained the club during the Depression," nods Thomas. But it's taken more than Olympic medals to keep this club competitive. "Originally

WAC members were primarily businessmen," says President and CEO Jim Johnson. "And, when in town, celebrities such as Bob Hope and Bing Crosby would frequent the club."

But according to Johnson, the demographic has changed along with members' needs. So the WAC is now catering to a new, more diverse clientele.

### FOR SEATTLEITES, NOT SOCIALITES

"With 70 percent of our clients living close to or in downtown," says Vice President of Marketing Brian Bradley, "we are a reflection of Seattle."

The WAC of today is more of a fitness and social club for Seattleites, not a Seattle club for socialites.

"What we do is much less formal than it used to be," acknowledges Johnson. "None of us forced this change; it happened through the diversity of our members."

Johnson and Bradley agree the key factor in a successful adaptation is listening to the members' wants and taking a progressive approach to their overall well-being. With nearly half of the membership female, many of whom are also high-powered executives and business owners, the WAC is more family-oriented than ever before.

"During the week, we have a certain influx of businesspeople doing their routines," explains Bradley. "If you work out





Instructor Marywilde Nelson (standing) works with clients on the popular exercise method known as pilates.

here in the morning, you're likely to know everyone there."

"But then we get an entirely different group of people on the weekends," remarks Thomas. "Sometimes 250 children are here doing karate on Saturday mornings."

Both ends of the spectrum say they share a certain camaraderie at the club, which is part of the reason that more than 50 percent of its members have been returning for 10 years or more.

"When looking at the building from the outside, people have no idea that we are so much more than an athletic club," says Thomas. "When you become a member, you get plugged into the ladder, begin to meet people, and hopefully find balance."

#### MORE THAN A WORKOUT

Indeed, you'll find the means for a great workout at the WAC. Featuring a women-only floor, a men-only floor, and a coed area designed for working out with one's significant other, the WAC has the latest equipment, personal trainers, and cut-

ting-edge classes. And many members join just for that purpose.

"I mainly use it as it as a workout facility," says Kent Johnson, an eight-year member and managing director of Alexander Hutton Venture Partners. "I can work out for 45 minutes, grab a sandwich there, shower, and be back to work within about an hour and 15 minutes."

But more and more often Johnson also finds himself using the WAC's club programs. For example, he recently discovered the WAC's special connection with tickets for local events.

"Instead of Ticketmaster, now I just call the WAC," he explains. "I've been extremely pleased with the seat selection — we're talking things like the fifth row from the stage at *Phantom of the Opera*."

To members, the WAC means more than a place to work out: It's also a way of making the details of every day life a little easier. From theater tickets and "Wee WAC" day care to the "Inn at the WAC" and reciprocal membership in more than

200 other clubs worldwide, the WAC offers more amenities than most members could ever use. It also features social events like wine-tasting dinners, networking mixers, and club sports.

Even more valuable to many is the in-depth concentration on maintaining health and wellness as well as helping members recover from sickness and injury. As part of the WAC's five-year strategic plan, on-site physical therapy, a spa, and a wellness department have been added.

"The WAC is about quality and enriching the lives of members," says Stuart Eivers, the WAC's on-staff physical therapist. "And so is the goal of physical therapy."

Members who may have health concerns but are hesitant to see their doctor are able to pay a \$25 fee for a 15-minute consultation that is covered by most insurance plans.

"I had a member catch me in the hallway and say she had a pain in her abdomen, so I later mentioned it to Stuart and he said it could be a hernia," Thomas





**The WAC's historic, 21-story building (left) at Sixth Avenue and Union Street was erected in 1930. Besides the exercise facilities, the building contains 113 hotel rooms and three restaurants, including Torchys's (right).**

recalls. Sure enough, the physical therapist was right and the member sought help immediately.

"That's the kind of relationships we have here," smiles Thomas. "Always looking to help each other out."

The club also offers three restaurants. And while one caters to smokers and another touts being among the Top 10 in Northwest wine selections, healthy dining is definitely a priority for many diners.

"I'd recommend the wild salmon," says a well-informed waiter. "It's high in Omega-3s!"

With a nutritionist also on staff, custom vitamins are created and nutritional breakdowns of every item on the menu are available down to the tiniest ingredients.

#### MENTAL PUSH-UPS

Taking the stance that mental health is just as important to the body as exercise and eating right, the WAC is focused on a future of helping create balance for their members.

"We're thinking ahead to corporate well-

ness and moving forward in a meaningful way," states club president Jim Johnson.

Using technology originally designed to help doctors maintain the health of coma patients, the WAC is now offering metabolic testing in the workplace. This test tells workers how many calories they normally burn at rest so employers better understand their health needs.

"We can bring corporations to us or we can go to them to help improve the lifestyle and productivity of their workers," says Thomas. "We do stress screenings and stress-handling scenarios."

While many fitness facilities have yet to embrace the belief that individuals need physical as well as mental health to maintain balance in a high-stress environment, the WAC's approach hearkens back to the old Latin saying "Mens sana in corpore sano," or "A sound mind in a sound body."

"The evolution of the human mind is the last frontier. We want to better understand it and provide a balance with wellness, fitness, and productive ways to approach life," concurs Johnson. And he insists this idea can reach much farther than the walls of a 21-story club in Seattle.

*Lori Hinton is a Seattle-based freelance writer.*



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