

Starting Strength

No Chalk Allowed!

Touring a few American Fitness Chains in Search of a Strength Training Gym

by

Shaun N. Jafarian

Today's fitness industry has ushered in a new paradigm of what Americans consider a "gym." In cities across the country the traditional small, privately-owned gymnasiums are being quickly replaced by large corporately owned "fitness center" chains. Mammoth palaces of colorful machines, even more colorful clothing, at least one juice bar, and more tubes of shame (aka tanning beds) than flat benches. They've got all the amenities today's common gym rat or *Rattus plebeius palestra* to the scientifically inclined, could possibly desire. One can flail around on a giant rubber ball, enjoy a delicious \$8 smoothie, or go strap into a futuristic machine that looks as though it was designed to be the centerpiece of one of *Tool's* music videos. How about pedaling away on a stationary bike in a movie theater while giant robots battle it out on the big screen? Yes, you can.

However, if one's interest is true strength training, as opposed to comparing apparel while mastering stairs, these bastions of fitness may leave something to be desired. Recently I've faced the challenge of finding a gym suitable for working toward my strength goals after spending over a year as a member of the Wichita Falls Athletic Club. To say my perspective on what constitutes a "gym," particularly in regards to strength training, had been transformed by my time in Wichita Falls would be a gross understatement. I'll admit it; 15 years ago I might have been referred to as a disco bodybuilder. I was completely comfortable using 18 different machines on "chest day" and never really getting any stronger. As an adult with more education and experience I now lift weights exclusively for the purpose of getting stronger. And my notions of what constitutes an acceptable training environment have transformed into a more pragmatic, utilitarian model.

While this model was embodied quite well in the WFAC, Uncle Sam would have it that I move on from my time in Texas. I had to say goodbye to the familiar round iron York plates, the old school power racks, the presence of chalk *everywhere*, including the air, and the smell of varnish in the Olympic room when the platforms had been freshly refinished. It was time to find a new place to train. I was about to return to a world where the odor of perfume hung around the cardio equipment while cheap cologne assaulted the senses near the weights. I'd be training in places that made it impossible to even touch a weight without simultaneously viewing oneself in 3 different mirrors. Abattoirs filled

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with hipsters bouncing up and down on giant rubber balls in a fashion reminiscent of the recent *South Park* episode about testicular cancer. Pragmatic utilitarianism was about to be swapped for gaudy pretentiousness.

As I made my trek across the country I had the opportunity to sample several of the big-name fitness conglomerates. It had been several years since I'd stepped foot in one of these atrocities, and despite my horror I'm sure it was my eyes that had changed over the years far more than the gyms themselves. In total I would visit gyms in 6 states in just a couple of weeks, from the West coast to the western edge of the Eastern Time zone.

First up, 24 Hour Fitness. Nearly 30 years in business, this is the world's largest commercial fitness center chain. It's the Wal-Mart for those looking to generically enhance their health through exercise. Just as the above mentioned discount retailer, 24 Hour Fitness gyms can be found in an assortment of sizes. From the enormous 100,000 square foot "Ultra-Sport" to the miniature single room "Fit-Lite," it would seem at first glance this mighty corporate fitness chain should have everyone's training needs covered. Clearly the gym's title invokes a sense of convenience; the notion that one can go train 24 hours a day could be enticing to some. However, as it turns out the name doesn't say it all. Several of them that I encountered would close on Saturday and Sunday night, effectively becoming "24 Hour Fitness, Except on Weekends." On their website I signed up for a 7 day free trial and proceeded to one of their "Super Sport" locations. This particular iteration occupied about 60,000 square feet in a shopping district a few miles outside of a metropolitan area. After tolerating the requisite sales pitch and repeatedly explaining I just wanted to "try it out," I was set free amongst a vast array of equipment I will simply never use. This is a fact that applies to all the big fitness centers I would eventually visit on this fruitless search for a serious strength training club. It is not an exaggeration to say that 95% of the equipment in these places is totally unnecessary and a good portion of it counterproductive to strength training.

An example; The Kegel machine. At least that's what I've always called it. A few seconds wasted on Google indicated this repugnant piece of hardware is referred to as an adduction/abduction machine. A middle aged trophy wife can usually be seen occupying this ridiculous contraption, legs spreading and closing ever so rhythmically while her ipod fills her head with the sounds of Michael Bolton. Henceforth this machine will be known as... the Kegel machine. If your gym has more Kegel machines than power racks, it's time to find a new one. There is absolutely no functional reason whatsoever to apply resistance to one's hips and inner thighs in this manner. I'll leave a refutation of this statement to the more imaginative.

This 24 Hour Fitness was home to a single power rack. Next to it was an angled squat rack, while two Smith machines sat in close proximity. The Smith machines were occupied with people doing whatever it is they do with that thing while the power rack was empty. I was happy to see some round plates mixed in with the 12 sided rubber-coated ones that always dominate these clubs. There was no dedicated deadlift platform, but that was no big deal since the power rack and round plates were all I needed. This rack did not include a pull-up bar at the top. No chalk was offered anywhere in the gym, but this was no surprise. I had brought my own, and I also noticed a few faint remnants of past chalk use on the bar. That's a good sign and one that would be absent in some of the other clubs I'd call on. I was able to accomplish a standard 5x5 day of squats, presses and deadlifts without ever having to venture outside the familiar comfort of the only power rack in the joint. I finished my workout with a few sets of dips on an assisted dip/pull-up machine after stowing the gravity-defying pad-of-the-weak. This was the only option because a conventional dip station was nowhere to be found.

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Assisted chin/dip machines are another pet peeve of mine that are all too common in these corporate clubs. The dip handles can usually be rotated in and out to provide two width settings, however the pull-up bar is limited to a relatively wide grip, as the dip movement necessitates room for the lifter's head at the top of the exercise. In this case, form follows dysfunction. Moving the pad-of-the-weak out of the way usually requires removing the pin from the weight stack, pushing the pad to the floor and replacing the pin in a hidden hole on the bottom of the pad that will hold it to the frame of the machine. Others simply fold up, so that one's legs constantly hit the bottom of it on each repetition of a set of pull-ups, reminding the lifter that he's using a machine for an exercise that it wasn't really designed for. Now, I don't have a problem with this machine per se; it's a great tool for geriatric women and morbidly obese teenagers to be introduced to the basic movement associated with dips and pull-ups. But it'd be nice to have the option to do these routines properly and not necessarily on the same piece of hardware. The unassisted, combined leg lift, dip, pull-up station often suffers from the same excessively wide grip pull-up bar unless the bar is placed on the opposite side of the dip handles, which is a rare find in these gyms.

In total I would visit 4 different 24 Hour Fitness locations. One of them had a dedicated deadlift platform, none of them had more than two power racks, one had a single rowing machine, (my preferred warm up routine) and two of the four had nothing but 12-sided plates. The problem with doing heavy deadlifts with 12-sided plates deserves an article all on its own, more on this later. None of them offered belts on loan, but they were more than happy to sell me a shiny new one at what I assume to be about 1000% markup. Overall, if it's all that's available I could make this place work temporarily, but it's far from ideal.

It's probably been noticed that I've yet to address power cleans or any type of Olympic lifting equipment. Reason being, I simply never encountered any. Do not go to a commercial fitness chain expecting to engage in any type of movement that will result in dropping a loaded barbell to the deck. Occasionally I'd see some peculiar person doing a really fast reverse curl with a barbell that could not be distinguish between an abhorrent attempt at a clean or some terrible type of palsy. Either way, thankfully no one is dropping barbells because the proper equipment is just not present. CrossFit gyms most certainly have provisions for this, but again, a whole 'nother article.

Speaking of CrossFit, it has found its way into almost every gym, corporate or otherwise. Much like venereal disease, it spreads voraciously, is difficult to get rid of and can really ruin what should have been an enjoyable experience. Furthermore if not stopped in its tracks it can lead to hospitalization and/or personal disfigurement. I discovered a small, privately owned gym in the Midwest that I initially had high hopes for. While definitely not a dedicated CrossFit gym, it certainly was friendly to true believers despite the total absence of Olympic lifting equipment. They had a couple power racks, round plates, the very minimum requirements. This experience was unique in that the patrons themselves made the place nearly intolerable and unusable. I was able to gain entrance with a small fee and a brief speech from the girl at the counter. Imagine my surprise when I spotted a man on a treadmill, running at what appeared to be full speed, with a 25 pound dumbbell in each hand, doing an assortment of random presses, swings, flails, curls, extensions and pulls. (Don't ask me... try to picture it yourself.) The girl noticed the look on my face as I glanced at this spectacle.

"Oh he's a firefighter." She proclaimed so matter-of-factly. As though I should have known.

"Oh, well obviously. I'll go get my lighter from the car." She didn't get it, or didn't think I was funny.

"And one more thing, we don't allow any cell phone use in the gym." She lowered her chin and tried to look stern.

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“You’re telling me I’m not allowed to pull my phone out of my pocket in here but doing *that* is okay?” I queried with raised eyebrows as I gestured towards what I assumed would result in a call to 911 within the minute. “I won’t be here long.” Tough crowd. She wasn’t nearly as amused by the situation as I was.

I gave the treadmill section a wide berth as I made my way to the weights, vigilant for an errant flying dumbbell I was certain would come crashing down somewhere. I wish I could say the speedy, dexterous fireman and his stationary sprint to strength was the end of the absurdity, but I hadn’t seen anything yet. In the weight section I discovered an eclectic collection of crossfitters, bodybuilders, Jersey shore hipsters and steroid monstrosities, all of them thrashing and bounding about the equipment. It was like walking into that bar in *Star Wars*, only the glasses had been replaced with kettlebells and the cantina band consisted of four tank top clad doofusses occupying a single flat bench, one appearing to press, another standing above him doing some kind of bent-over row with the same bar, and the other two on either side chanting some meathead cadence in which the chorus included “It’s all you, bro!”

This should have been my cue to make a hasty retreat, but I figured I ought to get my training for the day accomplished, and I must admit I couldn’t pass up the chance of witnessing some epic train wreck – maybe a crossfitter doing deadlifts on roller skates merged head-on with a guy doing Turkish get-ups in the Smith machine. Alas, it didn’t happen – at least not while I was there. I was doing high bar Olympic squats in the power rack when some strange little man approached mid-concentric to offer up his unsolicited training advice.

“You’re squatting too low bro, gonna hurt your knees.” This was one of those moments my years in the U.S. military paid off. It had made me an expert in completely tuning out obnoxious noise and meaningless drivel. I continued my set as though my uninvited coach weren’t there. He took the hint and moved on, to his other trainees I presume. This gratuitous instruction offered up by strangers is a great motivator for building one’s own home gym. This place was amongst the worst I’d encountered in this regard. I must admit however, when it came time to hit the flat bench I was tempted to implore the chanting quartet to come cheer me on. Thankfully good judgment prevailed. I guess it really was “all me bro!” I had a fleeting desire to finish my routine with a little time on the treadmill. Very fleeting.

On my way out I was nearly obliterated by some tank top clad defective in a maximum sprint that had just leaped out of the Hammer Strength spider curl machine. He was on his way to the leg extension device, and from the speed and madness thereby demonstrated that his little life depended on some very short timeline to get there. I didn’t even have time to contemplate how entertaining tripping his dumb ass would have been. He clumsily landed at his destination and exploded into a frenzy of leg extensions that would have made Jack Lalanne, or whoever invented that machine during Prohibition, either roll over in his grave or shake his ghost fist in... confusion? I’m certain that this guy was not genuflecting at the altar of the *Fran time*, but he was some kind of true believer. Really, what does it matter? It’s like the difference between a Wahabi and a Salafi – is it really important whether they want to use a dull scimitar or a sharp kard to sever my head on video? No it isn’t. A zealot is a zealot, and modern gyms are full of them.

Overall, the members of this place encompassed the very worst of the contemporary fitness mindset. Ostentatious, uninformed sycophants turning useful equipment into broken components of a Rube Goldberg machine. “True believers” is an important phrase I’ve used a couple of times; it seems as though the fields of fitness and nutrition have a certain religious nuance to them. People often follow self-proclaimed “gurus” blindly and without the slightest hint of objectivity. Even in the absence of an “authority,” folks often hear some blather from someone who’s only credentials are

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above-average biceps. They then proceed to spread this frequently erroneous information like manure on their organic garden, and the results are what we find in these fitness centers.

Up next, the quintessential bodybuilding altar, Gold's Gym. While it doesn't quite boast as many members as 24 Hour, this ubiquitous club has over 700 locations worldwide and was made famous many years ago by the likes of Arnold Schwarzenegger and a host of other celebrities whose names adorn the walls of each location. Like the other corporate gyms, a free trial was just a few clicks away and I soon found myself enduring another guided tour and scripted sales pitch. The pillar of this peddling was the "personal training" they offered. For some asinine amount of money beyond the standard gym fee I could have my own personal parrot to echo cliché phrases of encouragement speckled with staccato technique tips. Now, to be fair, this isn't necessarily a bad thing for those just starting a fitness regimen, providing the trainer's education on the matter is sound. While I cannot attest as to whether this was the case or not, I will say based on how hard the salesman was pushing the issue that it must generate a lot of revenue. The rest of the tour consisted of pointing out all the amenities, or should I say *gimmicks*, that weren't relevant to my particular style of training. Namely, Cardio Cinema. As we approached the closed, windowless double doors I could hear a low, deep rumbling coming from within. Inside, *Transformers* played on a giant screen in the dark theater filled with stationary bikes, elliptical riders and stair masters. I was a bit mesmerized at first. I mean despite the fact that I'd probably never step foot in here again (unless they were playing some flick I desperately wanted to see, but then I'd rather sit on a couch or something as opposed to a stationary bike – perhaps I could affix three giant rubber balls together with one of those big rubber band thingies that seem to be everywhere to construct a makeshift Lazy Boy), it's a brilliant marketing idea.

Not only should it appeal to capitalists as it's obviously a lucrative concept – "*What? You mean I can watch Will Smith combat aliens and burn calories? At the same time? Where do I sign up?*" – it's also an effective way to get sedentary Americans off the couch and on to the stair master, or elliptical rider, or whatever other astronaut training apparatus they stick in there. As a side note I didn't see any treadmills in these dark auditoriums. I suspect the corporate lawyers at Gold's headquarters figured out the inherent risks associated with treadmills in dark rooms, even in the absence of dumbbell swinging firemen. So for many patrons it's a good thing. For a trainee who doesn't require a ploy to get up and PT, it's a luxury at best and a waste of money at worst. While its use is included in the membership fees, I imagine Cardio Cinema isn't cheap to build and maintain. Personally I'd rather not pay for it, which I didn't on this particular day, so I enjoyed the robots for a few moments and moved on. On my way out I noticed a sign indicating *Yentl* was up next on the big screen. Obviously they have all the angles covered.

After the tour of the juice bar and a painfully-detailed explanation of all the flavors of protein shakes I could consume there, I began my routine back in the free weights. This brings up another recurring theme in all these clubs: the weights are always hidden away in the back somewhere. It reminds me of the layout of a casino. Upon walking in, the flashy yet coma-inducing 25 cent slot machines are right out front. If one's interest is playing a game that requires slightly more skill a little more exploration is required. This Gold's had only one power rack, a couple of angled squat racks, and no less than five flat benches. It's always "chest day" at Gold's. I attempted to plan my routine out visually from start to finish. It seemed as though everything required was present, but overcrowding was an issue. This could be avoided by going during off-peak hours, but I didn't have that luxury. I approached the character in the power rack that was doing curls with the barbell.

"How many sets do you have left?" I tried to be assertive but polite. Seeing this useful piece of equipment being wasted in this manner is a very common but nonetheless aggravating sight.

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“Three. You wanna work in?”

“Thanks but I don’t think that’ll work very well. I intend to use this for what it was designed for.” In hindsight I should have taken him up on the offer, and then proceeded to completely reconfigure the rack for squatting and load the barbell up between every set. Using finite resources in this silly fashion should always be addressed, but I was a guest on this occasion and I really just wanted to get my training done and get out of there.

When it was my turn with the rack the first thing I noticed was the proximity of the angled rack to the right and the Smith machine to the left. No more than 12 inches separated the equipment, so little that the notion of lifters loading or unloading barbells simultaneously between adjacent racks was totally impossible. In fact, a few times I was concerned that the ends of the barbells could strike each other if I wasn’t extra careful. Not the kind of thing one really needs on the brain while squatting heavy. The guy in the angle rack was squatting as well, and we managed to time our plate changing so as to not get caught up in the foot of space between the machines. At one point I decided to comment on it to him.

“You think they put enough space between the racks in here? I bet if they really wanted they could find a way to fit another one right here between them.”

“Yeah they really stack ‘em in back here. It seems like there’s more room between the machines and the cardio stuff.”

“They need to stick a Kegel machine, on its side, right here between the power rack and the squat rack. THAT would be effective use of space.”

“A... what machine?”

“Never mind.”

The proximity of the racks to the wall of mirrors was not ideal. A lot of folks really enjoy looking at themselves while they lift. I’m not one of them, and I find mirrors a potential distraction while squatting, particularly if the rack is positioned right up against one. A mirror is not a strength training tool, it’s a grooming tool. I realize that a lot of the people in these places do not discern a difference between these two activities, so mirrors abound.

I visited 6 different Gold’s locations. Much like 24 Hour, some were better than others, and while overall I could get some basic strength training accomplished, none of them allowed for proper cleans or anything that resembled the Olympic lifts. A couple of them had no round plates whatsoever, but on the other hand I did manage to locate a couple of conventional dip stations and a nice straight pull up bar at the top of a power rack. Every single one of them had an adjoining tanning salon and a store selling overpriced supplements and protein shakes. Again, this chain is known for catering to bodybuilders, and it really shows. By this point I should have been able to ignore eccentric behavior in these places, but a few things stood out that just seemed to scream “Gold’s.” For one, wearing wrist straps in this place is apparently some type of badge of honor or gang indicator of some sort. By simply glancing in one of the four Cardinal directions I could find at least one bloated, moon-faced “bro” with wrist straps hanging below his hands. Seldom are the straps in use, but always present. I actually saw someone chugging along on an elliptical rider with wrist straps hanging freely. I would have been more impressed had he wrapped up to the grips on the machine. But again, I’m a pragmatist.

If Gold’s was the most usable and tolerable fitness chain for strength training that I’d investigated, then Planet Fitness was the least. I’m pretty sure I’m physically weaker just for having stepped into one of these. I must reiterate – *one* of these. That’s all it took. I’ll never go to another one, and I may just avoid any business located on the same block for good measure. There are over 500 of these franchises

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nationwide, and they were a major sponsor for the reality TV show, *The Biggest Loser*. Lots of jokes I could go with here; I'm going to take the high road this time and just describe what I witnessed.

As I approached the front desk I noticed a large stack of Krispy Kreme doughnuts there for the taking. I would later learn that they offer pizza on other days, and bowls of various free candies are always available. This chain claims to cater to people who are new to "working out" as well as the more experienced trainees, however their gimmick to help get people in the door is to offer up the most calorically dense foods on Earth for free upon arrival. The words, "Judgment Free Zone" were painted in giant letters on the wall, in addition to an utterly precious "Planet Fitness= No Critics." The entire place is painted in a stomach turning combination of purple and yellow, the colors of royalty and cowardice, or in combination, royal cowards. The guided tour took me through the seemingly infinite rows of treadmills, ellipticals and stationary bikes, the little David Beckham-looking purple employee blathering on about a host of stomach turning ethos, all of which were plastered up on the wall. When we got to the small weight section, (in the back, of course) I saw a single angled rack, a bench, and a Smith machine. I paused briefly to watch some smith machine warrior setting up under the bar, complete with the big black pad in place to protect his fragile traps from all that Smith machine-supported mass. He proceeded to engage in some type of "lift" that appeared to be a sort of achilles tendon stretching exercise, or perhaps a spleen expanding technique. One of those, maybe both. I noticed a usable pull-up bar fixed to its familiar place in the center of the dual circuit machine. Unfortunately someone was using both sides of the cables it sat above; he seemed to be training for the lead role in the Broadway rendition of *Spiderman*.

And then I saw it. A sign fixed to a pillar that read "No Chalk Allowed!" Honestly I found it curious that they would even *need* to post such a sign. The place is disturbingly clean. I'm certain it's sterile enough to be used to manufacture microchips or perform open heart surgery right there next to the row of Kegel machines. I have nothing against cleanliness in general (despite the appearance of my living quarters), but this gym looked like what Orwell would have described as a gym in *1984*. Clones simultaneously churning away on spaceman machines while frantically cleaning everything around them.

Anyway, there must have been a chalk-related incident recently to warrant the sign. As it turns out, "incidents" are not uncommon in this chain – they made the news not too long ago over the most preposterous of their policies. The now famous "Lunk Alarm." I don't know which soulless piece of human debris on the board of directors came up with this one, but it pretty much sums up the atmosphere this corporate franchise offers its members. Whenever a patron does something in this place the handlers disapprove of, an actual alarm will sound. Another axiom on the purple wall: "Lunk = One who grunts, drops weights, or judges." My piss began to boil at the sheer hypocrisy. If a person does anything that resembles actual strength training he will be immediately *judged* as being a "lunk," and *critiqued* with a blaring alarm. The few people I saw screwing around with the dumbbells looked as though they were handling fragile porcelain figurines, concentrating more on quietly placing them on the rack than actually using them.

By this point I knew I wouldn't attempt to train in this place at all, so I figured I'd entertain myself at Beckham's expense.

"Can I do cleans here?"

"Clean? Well we ask that you sanitize any equipment you use with our complimentary wet naps, but we have a staff that takes care of most the cleaning." I looked at him as though he just told me he wanted to impregnate my sister, and I don't even have a sister. Although just for my own personal amusement at this point, I had to continue.

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“What about deadlifts? Can I deadlift here?”

“No, you can’t do that here, but you can...” I cut him off mid-sentence. Whatever substitute for deadlifts this frail sap was about to offer would likely sicken me to the point as to force me to evacuate my bowels right there on the sterilized floor.

“Then I really can’t work out here.” I grabbed a chocolate doughnut on my way out the door. I figured I had likely developed diabetes just by walking around the place, so I might as well finish myself off. Planet Fitness is for out of shape Americans to go and stay out of shape. It’s the kind of place where pretentious, physically weak people pay money so that they can tell their friends they “work out” in a “judgment free zone.” The feeding of the cattle with unhealthy confections both before they pedal away to *Dancing with the Stars* and as they sashay back to their Toyota Prius’s couldn’t be more perfect. I do believe Planet Fitness is a glimpse into the future of the American fitness industry.

This is where we’ve arrived. The days of the privately owned, friendly gyms where people go simply to get physically stronger are coming to an end. Of course they still exist *now*, but mainly in circles where true strength training is an athletic necessity. Those of us amateurs who lack access to professional facilities often find ourselves making do with what these conglomerate fitness chains have to offer. It is possible to accomplish strength goals in these places, but it requires a little bit of flexibility and creativity. Above all it demands tolerance for exceptionally silly nonsense. G. K. Chesterton once said, “Tolerance is the virtue of the man without convictions.” While perhaps a bit extreme in this instance, the idiom is not without merit. When one finds himself training at a gym that doesn’t fully suit his needs, the process of either finding or creating an ideal setting should be as critical as the physical progression itself.

I learned several important lessons in this tour of extravaganzas. First off, bringing any ancillary gear to the gym is mandatory, as it doesn’t exist in most of these places. Belts, both the support type and the weight bearing varieties, should be owned by the lifter regardless of where he trains. Years ago I picked up a “chalk sock” at a sporting goods store. It’s a small egg shaped piece of flexible fabric filled with chalk. While actually meant for rock climbers it works perfectly for clandestinely chalking up in a club that doesn’t allow it. The greater challenge lies in finding equipment that allows for a full routine. In a couple gyms that seemed at first glance to only have 12-sided plates I was able to spot a pair of round iron 100-pounders over on the leg sled. Putting the 12-sided ones over these makes the deadlift bar still usable, the diameter being greater than the dodecagon plates. In fact, a single round 45-pound plate on each side will usually allow for 12-sided ones to be used safely without the asymmetrical shifting on the floor that occurs with those goofy things by themselves.

CrossFit dedicated gyms almost always possess effective strength and Olympic training equipment; however the costs – both monetarily and psychologically – are the prohibiting factor. If they’ll allow someone to train in their facility without paying \$300 per month to be taught to spin a kettlebell on the nose while doing burpees, it’d be a viable option. Equipment-wise, strength training doesn’t require all that much and neither does Olympic lifting.

My long term goal with respect to equipment is simply to own what I need and have adequate space to use it. Two years worth of dues at a commercial fitness chain would be more than a healthy start on a home gym. So what would define my perfect strength training facility? It’s incredibly simple: some type of rack to squat with, either power or stands like most Olympic lifters use, a flat bench, a pull-up bar, some dip bars and maybe a rowing machine to loosen up with. A platform for the Olympic lifts and a decent array of bumper plates, a bucket of chalk and a distinct lack of mirrors. While I tend to do all my cardio outdoors, I guess a functional treadmill would be a nice to have as a

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luxury for when the weather doesn't cooperate. I may be oversimplifying things a bit, but the point is that wasting money and time negotiating the obstacle course that is the modern American fitness center is difficult for me to justify.

If nothing more, I'd like the reader to come away from this article with the desire to actively seek their own ideal training environment. To not simply accept what we've all been force-fed as the latest and greatest fortresses of fitness, and refuse to settle for gimmicks and pseudoscience. Get back to the vital elements of training based on goals and proven strategies, but above all, enjoy doing so.

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