

what happened to the wall bars then?

Ask most of the suppliers and they will tell you that educational establishments are one of the key markets going forward. Two reasons for this: 1) schools and colleges need to upgrade their sports facilities in order to compete aggressively in the search for students and 2) they sense that, providing they get their product right, there is an opportunity to pick up more than crumbs from the commercial operators' table. Tim Webster reports from Queen Mary's College in Basingstoke.

If you're in mid-life, you'll probably remember the school gym vividly. The size of a shoe box, it had a polished wooden floor, a basketball hoop at either end, wall bars down the sides - on top of which one sat while waiting one's turn at five aside, wooden benches that doubled as goal posts, beams that swung out, as if by magic, from the wall bars, ropes that just begged to have knots tied in the end of them and big green mats that were less crash than crush. The changing rooms had overhead strip lighting, wire mesh lockers, concrete floors and luke warm run-through showers. At the end of every term you got to play pirates, which was subsequently outlawed on account of the fact that it had caused three quarters of all deaths in schools since the second world war.

In stark contrast, the new indoor sports facility at Queen Mary's College Basingstoke is £2 million worth of high-tech, plasma-screened educational modernity that would knock the socks of most small leisure centres - and the Precor-equipped gym is right there at the heart of it.

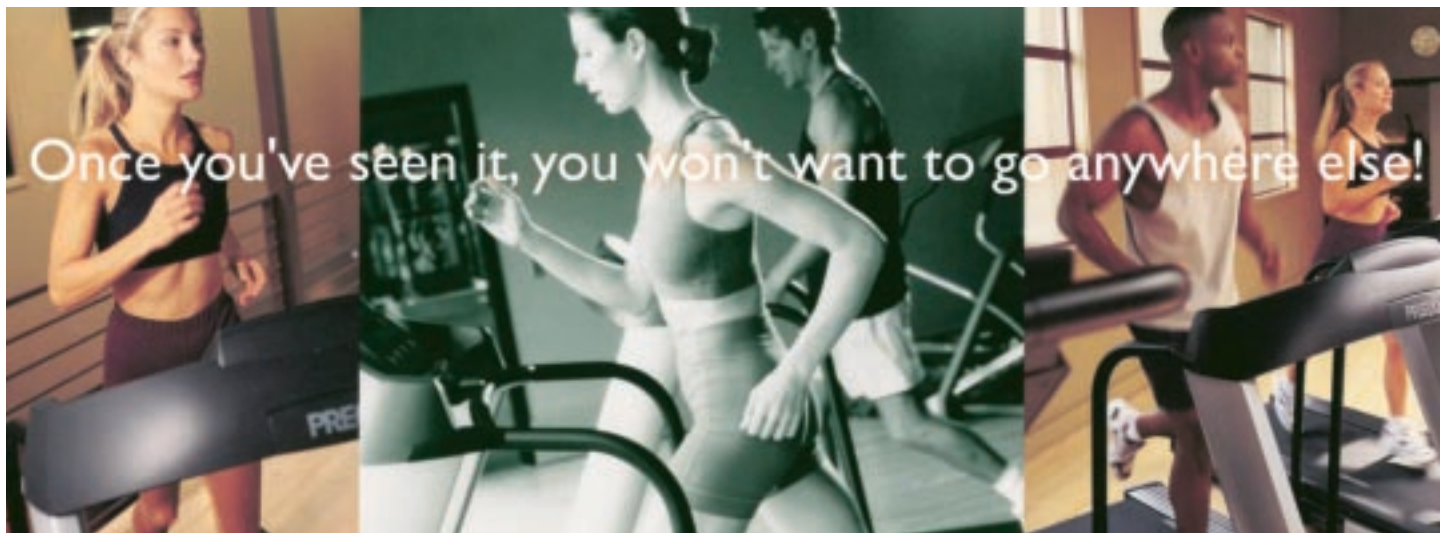


My appointment is with the sports centre manager Steve Allison but having arrived a few minutes early, I figured that I'd meet him in the new gym. "Looking for Steve Allison," say I. "He's not here yet," replies a helpful lady, "but Simon is". "Who's Simon?" "He's the full-time fitness instructor - can't miss him, he's the one with the

biceps." Sure enough, there he is in the midst of a hundred and fifty grand's worth of quality Precor kit. That's a hundred and fifty grand's worth of fitness kit in a school gym. Okay, it's a dual use community facility, but even so, to a man who never even sniffed a dumbbell until national service that's a lot of money.

"If you're going to compete with the commercial operators, and that's what we aim to do, then you have to have a facility that stacks up," says Steve when he joins us. "There is no doubt that the gym is a potential cash-cow and the college would like to maximise it. But we are not prepared to do so at the expense of our social objectives. In other words, if we can make money great, but if we break-even and become a focal point for the community that'll work too."

Laudable though these objectives are, there are also some hard financial drivers behind the investment. Queen Mary's is a sixth form college and as such it has to compete with other educational establishments in the area for its students. Suffice to say that a £2



million sports complex complete with state-of-the-art fitness centre and sports hall is expected to be a pretty big lure for the youth of Basingstoke.

Steve Allison has a target of around 600 members at £30 a month and, not surprisingly, he is quietly confident. "We believe that as the mainstream fitness market gets more competitive there is room for smaller community-based centres. Given the quality of the facilities and services we aim to offer, there is no reason why we shouldn't get 600 members - don't you think?" Don't want to put you under any pressure Steve, but I reckon you should do six hundred standing on your proverbial head mate.

Now, given the range of equipment options out there, why did Queen Mary's choose Precor? "They are very professional and helpful, and they have given us brilliant support at every turn," says Steve. "I think that the top three or four suppliers all make good fitness equipment, so for me it all comes down to service. As far as I am concerned, Precor excel in this department."

"Queen Mary's College is a great example of the entrepreneurialism and innovation being shown by educational establishments throughout Britain and we are delighted that they have chosen us as their equipment partners," says Precor's UK Sales Director, Jez Whitting. "Precor equipment has enormous versatility and is popular with a broad spectrum of end users. In this instance it has been great to work with a young audience, some of whom will no doubt go on to careers in the leisure industry."

As if the market isn't tough enough already, commercial operators from both private and public sectors are now being joined by well-managed, well-funded centres like the one at Queen Mary's offering an attractive package of facilities and services at a very competitive price. Ten years ago, even five years ago, I'm not sure that

working out in a school-based gym would have been that attractive to most, but given the value-for-money climate that currently prevails and the fact that educational sports facilities have improved beyond recognition, they are now a very viable alternative.



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