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Shelley Kapitulik, a Pilates instructor at Prive Swiss does a Pilates mat session at home from the vast video library on YouTube, on the Prive Swiss Fitness channel.

Beyond the gym

Despite closure, fitness studios keep members motivated

By **Lisa Reisman**

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For many gym owners and exercise junkies across the Shoreline, Gov. Ned Lamont's mid-March mandate closing all gyms and fitness centers seemed a cruel twist.

At a time of high stress and anxiety, when working out seemed more essential than ever, the daily endorphin fix promised by their classes and programs was gone.

That was nowhere more true, perhaps, than in the space housing Lisa's Bike and Bootcamp in Branford. Within hours of owner Lisa

Defaranos-Peterson's offer to loan out every piece of equipment in her studio, it stood virtually bare.

Think outside the box, she told the rest of her members.

Among their creative solutions: laundry detergent as kettlebells, soup cans for small weights, brooms for oblique twists, and countertop pushups.

For makeshift gyms, some have rearranged their basements or cleared out spaces in their garages.

Those are just a few ways fitness enthusiasts, and gym owners, across the Shoreline are adjusting to the new normal.

Here's a sampling of what other local gyms are doing.

At least relatively speaking, equipment, it seems, is the easy part.

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The challenge, say many studio owners, is helping their members find the motivation to keep working out.

"Fitness classes and gyms are popular for a reason," said Jodi Harrison-Bauer of Branford's JodiFit. "Leaving the house to exercise can provide that extra boost and mental space, without which workouts sometimes just don't happen."

It's also, according to Dana Brown, operations director of Prive Swiss Fitness, a boutique fitness studio in Westbrook and Madison, the sense of community.

"I think people keep coming back to our studio because of the people," she said. "We have a lot of members who depend on that social interaction, who look forward to seeing their friends and exercising with them."

Peterson emphasized the physical and spiritual balm afforded by working out.

"People exercise because they want to feel good about themselves and it does make people feel good physically, emotionally, and physiologically, but now is a time where being isolated can let depression set in," she said.

That's among the reasons that Guilford's TrueForm Studio has instituted live hourlong classes on Zoom ranging from barre to yoga to osteo fitness in order to promote bone density.

"It was really important to



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Jessica Joline, of Branford, a public school teacher and CrossFit enthusiast, gets relief from her "remote teaching" by getting repetitions on a heavy weightlifting bar and other equipment on Main Street in Branford. Branford CrossFit loaned the equipment for their clients to use while their business is closed.

me to keep our students not only moving and active but also to keep their spirits up, and to maintain, as much as we can, the level of energy and feeling of community we have in our classes," said owner Simone Gell.

The purpose of offering live classes, as opposed to on demand ones, she said, was "a lot of people wind up thinking they're going to do it later and later never happens."

For A.J. Alessi, co-owner of Branford Crossfit and South Madison Crossfit,

"keeping that sense of community and helping to motivate everybody," he said, meant dividing the gym into teams, assigning each team a coach, and maintaining a constant email thread between each coach and team.

In addition to an app where the gym puts all its programming, and members can log their own results and see the results of other members, Alessi and co-owner Craig Kenney are offering three virtual classes each day on Zoom, as well as a YouTube video explaining the workout.

"It's so important to have people you can lean on at this time and to have everyone doing the same thing as a group," said Alessi, adding that both Crossfit loaned out all its equipment to members as soon as it closed.

George Norden, owner of Joint Effort Exercise in Branford, Guilford, and Old Saybrook, as well as Cheshire, is

likewise taking a team approach, with his staff checking in with 12 to 15 of his 600 members at least once every week, "just to get them on the phone," as well as following up on their home exercise programs, complete with photos and videos.

With an older demographic, Joint Effort, in a process of "trial and error," Norden said, has shifted from Zoom to Facebook to YouTube Live, where members can simply click on a link in their email for virtual classes, which include low-impact cardiovascular, strength, and flexibility training, as well as work on balance.

"We've got to keep this going," he said. "Some of our members have worked so hard over years to regain a significant amount of their muscle and it's crushing to think two months might cancel that out, and mobility

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will decrease.”

Despite the financial hit the fitness studios are taking by the closure, the level of concern and willingness to go above and beyond for their member, it seems, is a measure of the bonds formed through grueling workouts and unimagined gains.

For Harrison-Bauer, “my member’s health and well-

ness are so important to me, and I see how their lives have changed when they’ve been consistent in coming to the studio. I had to come up with an alternative for them at home.”

TrueForm Studio for its part is offering their virtual hour-long classes for free.

“I quickly understood that this crisis is taking an economic toll on people, and they might consider group exercise a luxury,” Gell said. “I know how hard my students work in their classes

and I don’t want them to lose their level of fitness. This is our way of giving back.”

Prive Swiss is also giving back to the fitness community. The studio offers over 100 free classes on its YouTube channel (Prive-Swiss Fitness) with trainers, leading classes in everything ranging from a 20-minute full body workout to Vinyasa Flow Yoga to Pilates Mat. Workouts can be a quick 10-minute stretch session or a one hour barre class. Some videos, shot from their own living rooms, lend a comforting familiarity to the workouts.

As Brown put it, “Working out is a crucial part of life, for mental as well as physical health.”

In addition to daily Facebook Live sessions, Prive Swiss Pilates teachers are offering private sessions via Zoom and Facebook to its members to help keep them on track.

And Alessi is already forming ideas on how to get Branford Crossfit members to stick with their workouts if the lockdown drags on.

“The effect the isolation can have on somebody’s mindset, it’s real,” he said.

No one, arguably, has taken it further than Peterson, with two Zoom live video workout sessions each day; a private Facebook group page, where she explains the workouts, members post videos of their workouts and offer each other support and tips; and an evening Zoom chat open to all members.

On top of that, she’s “constantly contacting” people with texts and emails, “at least two different people more each day,” Peterson said.

“It’s my mission,” she said. “For people who are out at sea, feeling lost and alone, I can throw out a lifeline, and pull them back in.”

► Branford Crossfit, nationalathletics.net, 203-208-1825; JodiFit, jodifit.com, 203-208-0602; Joint Effort Exercise, jointeffortexercise.com, 475-221-8095; Lisa’s Bike & Bootcamp Studio, lisasboot.com, 203-738-9658; Prive Swiss Fitness, priveswissfitness.com, 860-391-8735; TrueForm Studio, trueformstudio.com, simone@trueformstudio.com.



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Joint Effort Exercise owner George Norden, center, with team.

— Editor ~~Simon Brader~~
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