

Recreation MANAGEMENT

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Outdoor Fitness Comes Into Its Own

New Outdoor Fitness Areas Improve Equipment, Amenities & Accessibility

By Chris Gelbach

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinvigorated interest in spending time outdoors. In its recent Outdoor Participation Report, the Outdoor Foundation saw total outdoor participation increase to 52.9% in 2020, up from 50.7% in 2019. At the same time, indoor gyms have suffered immensely. According to IHRSA, by the end of 2020, 17% of clubs had permanently closed, industry revenue fell by 58% relative to 2019, and 44% of the fitness industry workforce lost their jobs.

One recent survey even found that almost 35% of gym member respondents in the United States said they won't be returning to their gyms, even after being vaccinated. Many Americans plan to continue their new outdoor workout habits and forgo the gym moving forward.

At a personal level, the pandemic has taken a toll on the fitness of many Americans. In the American Psychological Association's February 2021 "Stress in America" survey, 42% of Americans reported undesired weight gain since the start of the pandemic, with those gaining reporting an average gain of 29 pounds.

In this environment, outdoor fitness areas can be a great way for parks and recreation departments and other entities to help support the fitness and wellness goals of their communities. When they are designed and placed well, these areas can create more equitable and inclusive access to wellness, fitness and social opportunities. And when the right equipment is chosen and effective activations implemented, they can also attract not only fitness enthusiasts, but people who are looking to get back in shape or even to get active for the very first time.

"One of the main approaches to adding outdoor fitness that we are seeing is areas that serve a wide variety of users—everyone from teens to seniors, regardless of fitness level," said Allison Abel, director of marketing for a manufacturer of outdoor fitness products based in Orange County, Calif. "Fitness areas that are thoughtfully designed to be inclusive will do the greatest amount of good in the community."

Abel recommended considering what's already in the current area and areas close by, and what demographics are being served well by outdoor fitness equipment versus those who could be served better. "Adding outdoor fitness equipment is a relatively simple project compared to some other amenities, and existing areas can easily be enhanced with additional units to give the gyms broader appeal," Abel said.



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Using a participatory design process that includes the community from the outset is also key. "We're seeing a lot more investment in understanding the community's needs and making sure that the community's voice is at the table," said Sadiya Muqueeth, director of community health for the Trust for Public Land (TPL). She also emphasized the importance of activating the spaces, an approach TPL has emphasized in the debut of the Fitness Zone areas it has helped place in hundreds of local parks across the United States.

Rob Boogmans, director of sport and fitness for a global provider of outdoor fitness products with a U.S. office based in Austin, Texas, also stressed the importance of including people like local trainers and boot camp instructors in the planning process. While they are often not considered in these stages, these individuals think about and often have good ideas about outdoor fitness. They are already working with clients in the outdoors and may even be potential partners in funding or programming these areas.

"Outdoor fitness a few years ago was simple equipment where you would go and work out with some friends, but now trainers are starting to run their business outdoors, and gyms [post-COVID] see the outdoors as an expansion opportunity," Boogmans said.

In his projects, he is seeing more collaborations between entities like local public parks and private entities such as gyms and trainers to finance these outdoor gym areas. "You actually see that gyms are doing part of the investment in the equipment, and in turn that gives them certain rights to use the equipment," Boogmans said.

He cited the example of Australia, where he said outdoor trainers in public parks are required to have a license, and the money from those licensure fees goes toward creating other outdoor training facilities. "And that actually means that the value of the license for trainers is going up, and it has all kinds of deliberate effects," Boogmans said. "Because it means that the sites get bigger and get more professional, but the cities also know there are actually experts on site. People who just want to work out can actually ask the trainers questions, so outdoor fitness is starting to professionalize."

Going Further With Functionality

Part of this process of the professionalization of outdoor fitness areas relies on a continual increase in the quality of the equipment itself. Because of the sometimes-harsh environmental conditions and the vandalism risks that this equipment must be able to endure, the equipment has traditionally skewed to being more basic than its equivalent indoor gym equipment. But as more people start to view these areas as potential replacements for their previous gym workouts, there's more pressure to enhance the functionality.

According to Boogmans, outdoor fitness equipment was once limited to equipment like pull-up bars and dip stations that could only be used by the very fit, or equipment that provided some movement but no real training effects. "Now, the fastest growth we see as a company is the whole need for equipment with decent functionality—the kind of thing that is adjustable and selectorized," Boogmans said.

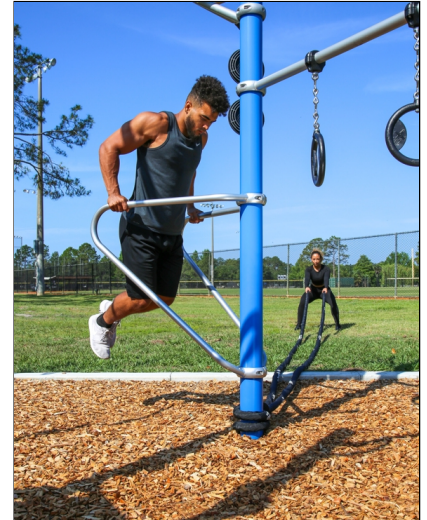


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In some cases, this is even starting to include heavy-duty selectorized equipment like leg press machines that can handle the outdoors and even cardio machines with durable touchscreens using the same materials ATMs use. For those worried about screen-related vandalism, the company also offers the option to go without touchscreens on controllable equipment like outdoor bikes that can instead be adjusted and controlled by the user's phone using an app.

Scott Roschi, creative director for a manufacturer of outdoor fitness equipment based in Delano, Minn., noted that his company is using barcodes and signage to also provide more explicit usage instructions for equipment that is becoming more functional and versatile. "It's just helping to identify, what muscle groups am I using, or making sure that I maybe am given three more types of exercise that I wasn't sure was even possible on this piece of equipment," Roschi said.

Boogmans is also seeing more clients opt for larger, gym-like sites that are starting to function as gym alternatives. "Budgets are going up very fast," Boogmans said. "Instead of just putting a few items in, you're starting to create big sites that actually serve as a new attraction. We are building sites now where more than two, three hundred people can work out at the same time. A few years ago, we did one or two of those big sites. Now we are creating these sites all over the world on a weekly basis."

As communities are investing more in these amenities, Roschi noted that they're also looking to use 5G networks and other technologies to track how much their equipment and their facilities are being used. "That's where I think the technology is going to be more impactful—just in understanding how effective a park is, how well it's used, and then being able to maybe make changes or adaptations to it to improve its usage and that initial investment," Roschi said.

Site Considerations

Some manufacturers are seeing a resurgence in interest in fitness trails, and those can be of particular interest for people and groups interested in things like obstacle course racing. But increasingly, clusters of equipment are being seen at trailheads.

"Putting units near a trailhead ensures that all trail users will have access to them," Abel said. "If the units are put along the trail, users at lower fitness levels, or those in wheelchairs, may not be able to reach all the units."

Abel also noted that outdoor fitness equipment can be placed in almost any area, large or small. "Consider underutilized areas you could possibly repurpose. One city transformed an empty area under a viaduct to install several multi-user units and create a gym where over 20 people could exercise," Abel said.

For larger areas that to some extent re-create gym layouts, with separate cardio, strength training and even group fitness areas, it can be best to locate them not only near trailheads, but also near bus routes, in close proximity to parking, and near other amenities such as restrooms for maximum usage.

"We find that when there's better access to parking, and even restroom facilities, users tend to stay in and use these facilities much longer than if they're having to worry about a metered parking space or access to a restroom," Roschi said. "Those are definite amenities that keep users and bring families into these spaces for a lot longer."

Central locations with access to other park amenities and to public transit also create more equitable fitness opportunities by making these facilities accessible to people who cannot afford a car or a gym membership.

According to a planning guide from the nonprofit FitLot, which has a vision to help every American access a cost-free public exercise space within walking distance of their homes, top questions to ask for thoughtful site selection include:

- » What areas in my community lack access to outdoor fitness space or programs?
- » Are there neighborhoods in my city that have been underserved compared to others?
- » Which neighborhoods would most benefit from a new outdoor fitness park?
- » Are there any existing public parks in my area located along a trail or bike path that connects different parts of the community?
- » Which local parks are located in densely populated, walkable neighborhoods?

Inclusivity

Likewise, locating spaces near public transportation and parking lots can also aid in accessibility for wheelchair users and other audiences. When selecting equipment with inclusivity in mind, some suggest including options that can be used for all users, as well as interspersing pieces like arm bikes that can be used by wheelchair users in between other pieces.

"The worst thing that can happen is creating a wheelchair-accessible gym space and then a non-wheelchair-user defined space, because that's truly not very inclusive," Roschi said. "Make sure that those items are blended in, so that that user doesn't have to feel different, by only using part of a gym space versus the entire gym space."

To be inclusive, the space should also feature a surface such as concrete, poured-in-place rubber or rubber tiles that makes the fitness area easily reachable by wheelchair users.

Targeting Different Demographics

For outdoor fitness spaces that target seniors specifically, Boogmans recommended making pathways a bit wider because there are likely to be more wheelchair users among that demographic. He also recommended including cardio and strength areas as well as some items based on balance training, mobility training and fall prevention.

He also recommended opting for more benches and more flower beds and other landscaping to make it more of an attraction for seniors beyond just the equipment, while also keeping the area a little more separate from other areas. "Create an area where there is some slight coverage but don't exclude it completely. It's very delicate to create the right atmosphere, if you really want to get the senior people," Boogmans said. "I would also not put it too close to a playground, because if you do, then the kids will claim it ♦ and for seniors that can be another barrier."

This is less of a concern for outdoor fitness areas aimed at younger adults and it can be a win-win for that demographic. For those users, having workout equipment near a playground or a spray feature can enable parents to get a workout in while still keeping an eye on their children.

Group Fitness Goes Outdoors

Manufacturers are also seeing more requests for flexible group training areas outdoors that can be used for multiple uses, as well as equipment areas that are better-suited to group training. "Outdoor gyms can be excellent for hosting classes, especially when designed with group exercise in mind," Abel said. "For



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high-intensity group exercise, kickboxing stations provide a great option. These can also be integrated with other functional fitness and CrossFit-style units in an outdoor gym to create a highly versatile space for hosting classes."

Roschi is also seeing more flexible open areas with durable surfacing that can withstand heavy use and shade structures that facilitate year-round use. These spaces can then become programmable ones used for yoga, boot camps, stretching and other outdoor fitness activities.

Made in the Shade



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Shade can dramatically increase the usability of any outdoor fitness area. But to achieve the maximal user benefits of outdoor fitness at a lower cost, it often makes the most sense to design around the existing natural tree canopy whenever possible. "It will provide shade, but there's also plenty of research that shows that doing exercise in a green environment actually has huge extra benefits ♦ it has a huge effect on how you experience your training and your workout," Boogmans said.

In partnership with FitLot USA and the AARP, Roschi's company has delivered at least one fitness cluster with shade for the 55-and-up crowd to every state in the country. "A key takeaway when you're doing fitness clusters is providing shade because it then becomes basically an outdoor gym that can be utilized year-round," Roschi said.

Additional amenities such as trash receptacles, benches, bike racks and bottle refill stations are among the other options that can create a more highly used amenity. And while not every site will have access to power, lights can dramatically extend the usable hours for the space while also making more appealing evening workout times in hotter climates a viable option.

Ninja Grows in Popularity

Producers of outdoor fitness products are also providing and installing more advanced features, including more ninja-style and street workout features to satisfy users of these increasingly popular activities. "New designs feature many more challenges than had been seen in outdoor fitness areas in the past," Abel said. "Instead of simple parallel bars and pull-up bars, you now see suspension trainers, ball targets, high rings and much more. These are creating exciting new ways to get exercise in and provide a challenge for

advanced users."

But these amenities are definitely for a much narrower user group of the young and very fit. While they can be a great complement to other outdoor fitness amenities, they should never be the first choice for a community currently lacking in outdoor fitness areas. Instead, the focus should be on serving a broader user group while still incorporating some equipment that is adjustable and functional enough to still provide a training effect to the very fit.

Reaching the Inactive

To reach more potential users, Boogmans recommends including some pieces that anyone will know how to use, even if that means putting some cardio pieces like exercise bikes in a fitness cluster near a trail. "What I really like about the cardio product is that you don't need any skills to do it. Anyone can sit on a bike and start riding. Anyone can do the elliptical trainers and get a training effect," Boogmans said.

Getting people using the equipment can include essential steps such as:

- » Providing some easy-to-use pieces of equipment that anyone can understand without instruction.
- » Conducting ribbon-cuttings, activations, social promotion and in-person instruction to make people aware of and teach people how to use the equipment.
- » Providing QR codes, signage, app instructions or other technologies to provide virtual instructions.
- » Partner with trainers, gyms and other entities to provide classes and activate the space on an ongoing basis.

"Often investors in these fitness areas want to activate the inactive," Boogmans said. "But the inactive will not be activated if no one is using [the fitness areas]. So create ownership and usage of the sites that will get the couch potatoes up and running, because they will never be the first ones to start using it."

By creating highly functional, appealing outdoor fitness areas, designing them attractively and activating them thoughtfully, you can take advantage of the growing trend of outdoor fitness. In the process, you can provide yet another way to help community members feel safer working out in a post-pandemic world while they also connect with nature more directly than they ever would in a traditional gym environment.

"People have really realized what they were missing being outdoors, and being able to do physical fitness outdoors is, I think, really going to continue," Roschi said. RM



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