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## **Dumbbells a smart way to work out**

Darnell Dickson

After six years, the Little Gym That Could knows it has arrived.

How?

Payson's Dumbbells Gym has become an irritant, the fly in the ointment that makes the big boys uncomfortable.

Bob Thomas, the trainer at Dumbbells, says he often gets disguised phone calls from Gold's Gym.

"Someone calls to find out what our prices are and what type of machines we have," Thomas said. "I know it's them."

Why would Gold's Gym, with three million members worldwide and five locations in Utah County alone, care about Dumbbells?

Maybe because what Dennis and Bob Thomas are doing in Payson works.

"We've tried to keep monthly membership price around \$20," said Dumbbells owner and Bob's father, Dennis Thomas. "Gold's keeps dropping their membership prices because they want to dominate the field."

As it turns out, Dumbbells caters to a different sort of clientele, anyway.

"We have people that have never been to a gym in their life," Dennis Thomas said.

"We have farmers come in and work out in Levis, or guys come in from work with a dirty shirt. We have women who come in who just had a baby and want to lose weight. Women aren't getting hit on in our gym. We have kids that are going on missions, then they come back and sign up with us again."

On the Dumbbells Web site: "What, then, has happened to the regular gyms? The gyms that smell kind of funny. The gyms that have chalk on the floors and hundred-pound plates laying around. They had the feel, the smell and the sounds of a gym. The truth being told, you don't need hundreds of different machines to help you build a great body."

## **Cathedrals of sweat**

The so called "big box" health clubs are more popular than ever. **The Mercanti Group**, based in Minneapolis, released a study last year indicating 41 million Americans have health club memberships and since 1983, the industry has experienced an eight percent annual growth rate.

Mega gyms like Gold's, World's, 24-Hour Fitness and Bally's offer shiny, trendy cathedrals for workout facilities -- and, according to bitter membership holders, iron-clad lifetime contracts that are impossible to cancel. Complaints received by the Better Business Bureau for fitness clubs have increased more than 90 percent in the past five years. And according to a new analysis conducted by the BBB, the most common complaints consumers have about fitness clubs focus on two related areas: Contract disputes (41.5 percent) and billing problems (31.7 percent). Consumer sites are full of horror stories about everything from contract issues to sexual harassment lawsuits.

Just call Dumbbells the "anti" mega gym.

### **A family effort**

Dennis Thomas, who's "real" job is as a senior building inspector for Park City, runs Dumbbells Gym, but has plenty of help from his family. That includes sons Bob, Tad and Brian, their wives and Dennis' brother, Pat. The idea for starting a gym came to Dennis when he and Bob observed the rampant drug use among college athletes. They wanted to start a business that would help athletes recognize proper training techniques. Dennis, who coached little league sports for 30 years, said Payson was the right place to start.

Six years later, Dumbbells has gone from averaging 60-100 people a month to about 400. They started out with 600 square feet but now have 12,000, which includes a basement area where an ultimate fighting team called "Unbreakable" works out.

"A lot of small gyms in Utah County have failed over the years," Dennis Thomas said. "The big gyms' goals are to shut everybody else down.

"Dumbbells is a family-run place, almost like 'Cheers' or 'Average Joes.' From beauty queens to tattooed men and women, Dumbbells Gym has welcomed them all for six years."

### **A lifestyle change**

Every gym has its success stories, and Dumbbells has plenty. There are the serious athletes: Jarom Thurston is a ultra-marathon runner. Tom Napierski is a amputee

bobsled racer looking to qualify for the 2010 Paralympics. Sarah Kelsch has competed for Canada in bodybuilding competitions.

Then there are simple successes by normal, everyday people. Patty Coombs and Carla Morgan both lost more than 50 pounds doing Dumbbells Women's Boot Camp class.

Kim Holt, a mother of six and a former Gold's Gym employee, has lost 108 pounds and now teaches the spinning class that helped her achieve her goals. Before she found Dumbbells, Holt described her life as a "sad time."

"I was depressed, totally not active," she said. "I was lethargic and pre-diabetic, my blood pressure was through the roof, I had knee and back problems. I wanted to be around for my kids. I knew I wouldn't if I continued on the same path."

Holt went to Dumbbells and found the expertise and attention she needed to attain her desired quality of life.

"People ask me how I did it," she said. "And it's exercise. Nobody wants it, they all want a pill. But what I found with Dumbbells is their knowledge is incredible. They're willing to share their knowledge with you. Your membership is 20 bucks and that's it."

"You go to Gold's and you have to be dressed to the hilt to get help. At Dumbbells you go in and out sweaty and that's OK. It's not a meat market. Everyone's there to work out and meet their goals. People are crazy not to take advantage of Dumbbells. The people here in Payson truly don't realize what a gold mine this gym is."

Dave Johnson found out the same thing in reverse, as he was at the opposite end of the spectrum, unhealthily thin because he didn't eat right.

"I was a heavy smoker, got into trouble, drank like a fish, 130 pounds soaking wet and out of shape," Johnson admitted. Now he's a healthy 200 pounds and bench presses almost 300.

"I'm a totally different person now," Johnson said. "When you walk into some gyms, you're just a number. You go to Dumbbells and you're part of a big family. They care about you. They recognize and help you achieve your goals."

Johnson likes his new self a lot better.

"I don't smell like an ashtray now," he said. "Dumbbells helped me get past those old, bad habits."

Johnson, who works at Pacific States Cast Iron Pipe in Springville, made such a transformation that his bosses took notice and are now offering gym passes to other employees.

## **Don't look far**

As you can imagine, Bob Thomas is a pretty popular guy at Dumbbells. He frequently gets invited on family vacations, trips to Bear Lake for fishing and camping and out to dinner by grateful patrons who have been able to meet their fitness goals under his direction.

He's an AFTA (American Fitness Training of Athletics) certified trainer, a former Orem High football player who decided he wanted to make a difference in other people's lives. Dennis Thomas said the AFTA graded out Bob's training and diet program as the best they've ever seen.

"It makes me feel good knowing I've helped people create a new life for themselves," Bob Thomas said. "A lot of people are in the dark about nutrition and training. I help them set up good workout plans. There's no contracts here, no pressure. We're just here to help the community. I think a lot of the big gyms have lost that.

"People always think they need something bigger and better. Sometimes they just need the stuff in their own back yard. We're in their back yard."

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