

## **Gymnasiums – where WFA did not work out**

James Manly

Greg Whateley

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WFA became the catch cry of numerous businesses and industries throughout the pandemic- and in this transition period out of it. Law courts operated on line; medicos conducted online consultations; teachers managed classes online; virtual retail outlets flourished; and virtual streaming and performances proliferated. Managing gymnasiums during COVID-19 on the other hand - became a complex task and attempts to virtualise activities and classes did not do well. It had a lot to do with the fact that gymnasiums have always provided a physical outlet for stress and tension and the resources required are many – online (virtual) options did not do the trick.

With the return of patrons in more recent times there are a number of key areas that demand attention. As the return to site commenced there were in place a number of highly restrictive practices that made the average 'workout' less than satisfying. Slowly, though, things have returned to a relatively normal state – with some additional demands on owners and staffers that were not there pre – COVID. These demands are explored in some detail.

### **Hygiene**

Health and safety has always been important in gym facilities and for those staffing and using the facilities. Staff would always make sure the gym equipment was wiped down once or twice during a 4-5 hour shift - prior to COVID-19. Since COVID-19 gym equipment is now generally wiped between 4-5 times each shift suggesting wiping of equipment has *doubled* since the pandemic. Each night the gym equipment is deep cleaned by professional cleaners. This heightened awareness and activity is well supported – and has become a vital aspect of gym management and operation.

Prior to COVID-19, gym management would encourage the use of a full bench towel. Since COVID-19 this is now mandatory - and enforced if patrons do not have a towel they are strictly unable to train. Again, a heightened requirement – but quite a reasonable one on consideration.

Continuing to ensure members have access to wipes - so they can wipe down the equipment after they use it - has increased at a significant cost to the gym – but deemed essential to ensure they maintain a hygienic and safe environment for staff and members.

There is little objection to any of this in truth – given the significant lock downs of gyms throughout the high COVID-19 period – patrons appear more than happy to abide with the new regulations and embellishments if it means getting back into action again.

<https://covid19.swa.gov.au/covid-19-information-workplaces/industry-information/gyms-and-fitness-centres/hygiene>

## **Masks**

Masks were not mandatory prior to COVID-19. During transition pandemic times gyms were allowed to reopen with the condition that a mask mandate was in place. It was recommended that members wear masks whilst training and was mandatory for gym staff members to masks throughout the entire shift between 4-5 hours. This element was less embraced by patrons for a number of reasons.

<https://healthcare.utah.edu/healthfeed/postings/2020/11/masking-at-gym.php>

It became apparent that wearing masks whilst training restricted the members' ability to breathe properly suggesting it actually became unsafe for them to train with masks. The simple task of walking and using public transport with a mask was onerous – it would come as little surprise that exercise and energetic activities became very difficult indeed. This condition was slowly removed. But, they were required to wear the mask when entering the gym and talking to the gym staff.

Gym staff - trainers and front desk personnel - had to wear a mask during their shift. A number of additional issues arose with the mask wearing – including being unable to understand what the members were saying; members not being able to understand the staff (augmented by the fact that sometimes English was not the member's first language); and staff being unable to breath properly whilst wearing the mask. Unlike the hygiene issue – this one was particularly cumbersome and troublesome.

## **Staffing**

Industry – both essential and otherwise – experienced significant staff losses and this has hampered preferred recovery rates. The media is filled with stories of staffing shortages. Airports throughout the country are calling for staff across all positions.

[https://www.mmaglobal.com/files/577\\_covid-19\\_gyms\\_impact\\_report.pdf](https://www.mmaglobal.com/files/577_covid-19_gyms_impact_report.pdf)

Prior to COVID-19 there were no issues in having all shifts covered or staffed within the gymnasium industry. After COVID-19 - and as gyms were allowed to reopen even with numerous restrictions in place - the staff that worked at the gym prior to COVID-19 were more than happy to return to being able to work after such long lockdowns (in NSW the first one was two months and the second one was over three months). Staff were keen to return to their positions – this was very much the case with community type gyms.

This is quite a different story to what we are collectively experiencing with shortage of teachers, nurses, medicos, transport workers and cafes/restaurants. In many respects the gym industry is fortunate.

## **F2F – Face to Face**

Prior to COVID-19 gyms were opening for members to come to either the actual gym itself or attend classes with an allocated trainer. Gymnasiums flourished and the last five years (prior to COVID - saw memberships flourish.

During the lockdowns (across the country), numerous gyms attempted to do virtual classes/sessions via ZOOM. For the first week or two it was reasonably popular as it was really the only way to get a workout done. Enthusiasm for the mode decreased rapidly as it was not the same as face to face classes and eventually most gyms decided to stop the ZOOM sessions. The view was that gym goers needed to physical connection and routine that was not readily available in the virtual environment. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/05/22/1099120054/pandemic-virtual-workouts>

Before gyms formally reopened to the public they were allowed to have face to face sessions outside - in a park for example - but with restricted numbers and other conditions in place. These sessions became quite popular and quite quickly with members given the restoration of the social aspect not available on screen. There is something about working with others in this environment – even though it still requires careful distancing.

Once the gyms were able to open the members flocked back to the facilities and the group sessions that were so popular prior to COVID.

## **Class sizes**

Prior to COVID-19 the only restriction on class size was determined by the size of the actual room available for the activity. Depending on the nature of the workshop it was not uncommon to have packed sessions with high levels of enthusiasm and interaction.

After COVID-19 (or best called transition from COVID-19) gyms were allowed to reopen but with numerous restrictions in place which included each member in the class had to be 1.5m apart from each other - so depending on the actual size of the room - it would limit the number of members a class could manage within the given space available. Some classes might have to be capped at 16 people for example in some sessions.

Post COVID-19 restrictions some classes have returned to 25-30 members. This, in many cases, is a significant dip in group numbers. Again, reasonably well received by members – better than no classes at all. The gymnasium industry relies heavily on the face to face element – the COVID-19 pandemic had profound impacts on the industry that is slowly recovering as various restrictions are lifted.

The gymnasium industry is essentially a face to face experience environment. There have been a number of valuable technology based initiatives that have improved the management of processes within the industry – but the fact remains – enthusiasts were keen to return to

the physical environment and this is simply the state of play. The virtual did not work out (so to speak)

### **About the authors**

**James Manly** is Media Assistant at GCA and a staffer at a community gym in Sydney

**Emeritus Professor Greg Whateley** is Deputy Vice Chancellor (UBSS) and Vice President (Academic) at GCA.