

Students now have no excuse for not staying in shape

High-tech rec

Now there's no excuse for students not to stay in shape -- they can watch TV, listen to Web radio, surf the internet and even respond to e-mail while burning off the pounds.

By Robb Murray, The Free Press [published in The Free Press, Mankato, MN, 10/29/2005]

Photo by John Cross



Amanda Albers, a Minnesota State University sophomore from Goodhue, gets in a late afternoon run while catching up on a little TV. The cardio equipment in the newly renovated Otto Arena is getting a lot of attention. Each treadmill, stationary bike and elliptical machine has a technology station that allows users to surf the Internet, watch DVDs or tune into their favorite television program. MSU officials say no other college or university in the nation is this high-tech in the workout room.

MANKATO — Rick Kes hops on the stationary bike, slips the headphones over his ears and begins pedaling his way into cyberspace.

It's almost a bittersweet trip. Kes has been a student here for four years. But only now, during the last semester of his career as an undergraduate at Minnesota State Mankato, do they roll out the cardio equipment that soon will be the envy of everyone who's ever hopped onto an elliptical machine and found themselves wishing the experience weren't quite so ... boring.

Within minutes after hopping on the bike, Kes already has checked his e-mail, checked up on the online components of his classes and settled into an old episode of "Law & Order."

"When I came here as a freshman, we had a few TVs and four or five treadmills, and that's it," Kes said.

Today, the difference in what students have access to in terms of physical fitness is astounding. It's amazing what \$8 million can do.

There is a new basketball floor, twice as many cardio machines as before, a new running track, new weight-training equipment. And attached to each piece of cardio equipment is about \$2,800 worth of computer and mounting equipment that brings an entirely new meaning to the world of "cardio theater."

While using a treadmill or stationary bike or elliptical machine, students can surf the Internet, write research papers (in theory, anyway), check e-mail, choose from more than 75 channels of television, pop in their favorite CD or DVD or even plug in their iPod. Anything they can do on campus network can be done in the Campus Recreation Center.

Of course, the custom-built machines are not for everyone. Stacy Marg, a freshman from Winona, had the TV on, but normally she doesn't need a lot of distractions.

"I might look for Web sites (while doing research for classes)," she said. "But doing actual homework? Probably not."

But Marg says the options provided by the new equipment might be enough to actually prompt someone to exercise who normally might not.

Kes, who says he works out regularly, agrees. He says obesity is becoming a huge concern, and anything that can shake young people out of a sedentary existence is a good thing.

When Campus Recreation developed the ideas for what amenities the new Otto Arena would offer, they thought long and hard about the desires and habits of the generation of kids coming out of high schools today. They also thought about recruitment and retention. And with a pile of money to use on equipment, they decided to create a fitness environment that would appeal to young people, and allow them to do as much multi-tasking as possible.

"We were looking for something that could provide television, like all other facilities have," said Wayne Sharp, director of Minnesota

State Mankato's Academic Computer Center, "but we wanted to do better."

At the cardio machines, users begin with a screen that has large buttons, to compensate for users who may be in the middle of a frenzied workout. Some of the keyboards are made of a washable, floppy rubber, suitable for washing away the drops of sweat that accompany tough workouts.

Todd Pfingsten, director of Campus Recreation, said studies have shown that given the choice between having nothing, television or the full TV/Internet experience, users overwhelmingly say they want the latter.

"It becomes monotonous," he said. "It becomes tedious."

And Minnesota State University is the only university, officials say, that is offering the service on such a wide scale. More than 40 cardio machines now offer the full TV/Internet experience.

It is still new, and Campus Recreation officials say most students at this point are using the high-tech machines to simply watch TV.