

University of Pennsylvania opens grand new fitness facility

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By Art Carey

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As a Pumpkin Head (i.e., Princetonian), it pains me to say this, but I predict an era of Quaker dominance in sports large (football) and small (squash) and expect to see the best bods in the Ivy League parading down Locust Walk.

The reason for such a forecast: The University of Pennsylvania's spectacular new fitness and strength-training facility under the brick arches on the north side of Franklin Field.

The George A. Weiss Pavilion is its formal name, and it encompasses the Robert A. Fox Recreational Fitness Center and the Varsity Strength and Performance Center. (Still to come: an athletic training center and new locker rooms for football, men's and women's lacrosse, and women's track and field.)

Crawford Architects of Kansas City blended old and new beautifully. They took the unused concourse space under the storied stadium's archways, enclosed it with glass, and created a clean, well-lighted place for building sound bodies and improving athletic performance.

The \$26.7 million project was completed in the spring after 18 months of construction. The fitness center, available to students, faculty, staff, and alumni, opened in early July; the weight room began hosting Penn



Basketball players Jourdan Banks (left) and Jerin Smith do squats as part of their weight training.

athletes in early June.

What's remarkable is that Penn already had a palace of perspiration - the David Pottruck Health and Fitness Center at 37th and Walnut. Pottruck offers 19,000 square feet of workout space. The Fox Fitness Center, with another 8,000 square feet, is an east-campus chapel of exercise to Pottruck's cathedral.

"Best in the Ivy League by far," director of recreation Amy Wagner declared of Penn's fitness amenities.

The other day, Wagner and the aptly named strength and conditioning coordinator, Jim Steel, gave me a tour.

The two-level fitness center is outfitted with the latest equipment - treadmills, elliptical trainers, selectorized resistance and weight-stack machines. Certified personal trainers lead 30-minute circuit classes. The

wall of large windows floods the space with natural light.

The separate strength and performance center (a.k.a, “the weight room”) is a paradise for jocks. Created by excavating fill that covered the original level of the concourse, it’s below grade but, because of ingenious lighting, doesn’t feel underground.

“It could be a dungeon but it’s not,” Steel said.

And the new weight room is four times larger than its funky, dingy predecessor. “We used to have scheduling problems,” Steel said. “Now, several teams can work out at once.”

Among its features: 30 custom-made power racks for Olympic lifts, as well as chin-ups and dips; two straight tracks for sprinting; a host of specialized resistance machines for isolating smaller muscles and helping athletes prevent and recover from injury; spinning bikes; 18 heavy bags suspended from trolleys so they can be moved to create space for kickboxing.

“All the teams do it,” Steel said of kickboxing. “It improves balance and hand-eye coordination and it’s fun. After a long day at Wharton, it’s a great way to vent your frustration.”

Strength training, once practiced exclusively by football players, wrestlers and some track athletes, has now been adopted by athletes across the board, including those who play such sports as soccer, fencing, tennis, squash, and volleyball. Many train with weights year-round.

“It’s fantastic,” said Ellyn Barkley, a sophomore member of the varsity volleyball team, “the greatest weight room I’ve ever seen. We all lift here all the time because it’s so nice.”

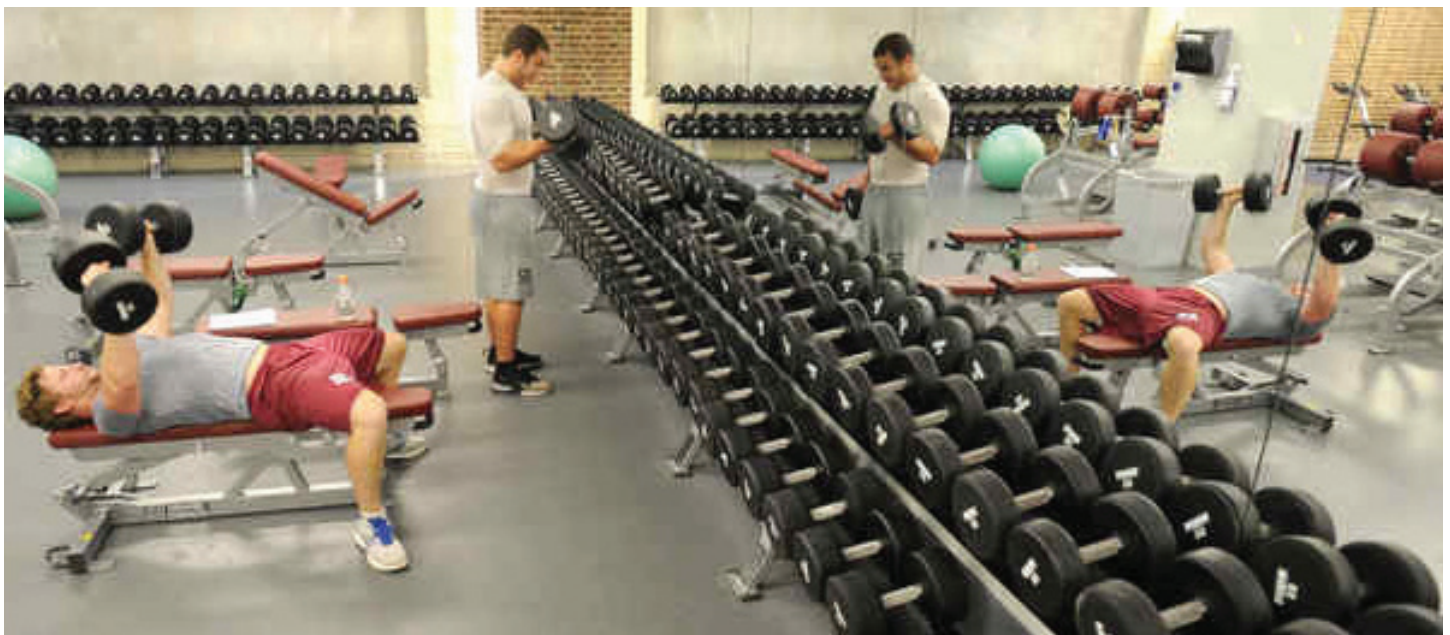
“Because the athletes love being down here, they work out more,” said Kerry Carr, head women’s volleyball coach. “When we bring prospects here, they say, ‘Holy cow!’ It’s really going to help with recruiting.”

“This place makes you want to work out,” said Zach Heller, a senior linebacker on the football team. “There’s everything you could possibly need, including a lot of the equipment that’s unique to what we do.”

Added fellow linebacker Jason Rasmussen: “It gives you extra incentive to try harder.”

“The one thing an athlete can control,” Steel said, “is getting in shape and staying strong.”

Actually, that applies to all of us.



Quaker football players Jason Rasmussen (left) and Zach Keller pump iron in the section of the Weiss pavilion for athletes. It’s underground but not gloomy because of the ingenious lighting.