

## Journalism entry

### Welch Fitness Center: Out of shape

**Tyler** Anderson, '07, walked hastily past the Taylor Gymnasium lobby at 4 p.m., Lehigh ID in one hand and car keys in the other. He was excited about starting his workout, until he walked in and saw what he was up against.

Clusters of students were crowded around every bench, lines formed around a corner to use the shoulder press and rowing machines, and upstairs, every treadmill and elliptical was occupied; even the bike with the shredded rubber pedals and sharp, rigid seat. The free weight area is so congested there's hardly any room to stretch, let alone raise a weight. But you couldn't, even if you tried, because almost every dumbbell is taken.

"Too crowded, way too crowded," Anderson said and promptly walked out.

Behind him, three other students wearing the indelible mark of a freshman — the white Lehigh '09 T-shirt given to all first-year students during orientation — follow, one of them muttering to his buddies, "I thought the Eagles practiced here ..."

Eagles or no Eagles, 4 o'clock is rush hour for prospective body builders and casual athletes alike, and every day there is a mob of them.

"This gym is simply too small for this school," Anderson said "And if you don't get there before rush hour, there's no way you're going to get there at all."

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**Tyler's** experience isn't an exception to the rule; the crowding at Taylor Gym is like another of Lehigh's traditions, the 4 o'clock exam: an invariable, dreadful thing that can only be met with groans and tolerated with resolve. Students contend that their campus gym should match their needs – and their tuition bills. Meanwhile, the athletic department is scrambling for funds to improve its fitness budget and match those needs.

Joseph Sterrett, dean of athletics, doesn't want to be the bad guy for people like Anderson.

"The best time out of my day is talking to students," Sterrett said. "And I can bet that we're all on the same page."

The problem, he said, is people don't understand the difficulties the administration faces in improving the gym.

“The budget is not adequate for replacing equipment as rapidly as students would like to see it replaced,” Sterrett said. “New things, new toys, new exercise concepts are exciting, and we certainly would like to be doing more of that than we are.”

But the budget has limits.

“It hasn’t gotten bigger partly because we are all stretched to manage the budgets we have as carefully as we can so that overall Lehigh costs do not go up more than they already do,” Sterrett said. “Some, maybe many, students might view fitness investments as a higher institutional priority than it seems to be. Other students, and lots of faculty and others, view our investments in areas like technology, modern classrooms and labs as higher priorities.”

Sterrett does have some suggestions.

“If this is a real priority for lots of students, we have to find a way to do it better than we are doing it,” Sterrett said. “Maybe the answer is raising more money, but in that regard, we will eventually have to count on our current students who become alumni to give back to this place in higher percentages than our alumni currently give.”

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**Long** before crowds poured into Taylor Gym in fruitless searches for an open bench press or treadmill, Lehigh’s answer to an athletic facility was Coppee Hall. Built in 1882, Coppee served as the school’s first gym.

Taylor was built in 1913. What is now the fitness center was a simple gymnasium with boarded-up windows and two basketball courts for pickup games. Lehigh eventually added locker room space, a pool and a wrestling room on the fifth floor in 1950.

It wasn’t until 1994 that today’s facility began to take shape. The original fitness center boasted one Universal machine – an out-of-date, multi-stationed apparatus – and as many dumbbells as the school could find. Upstairs was an old, haggard boxing ring.

“We overhauled the whole thing,” Sterrett said. “People would come in and say, ‘This stinks,’ but we knew it could be something.”

That something started with an \$8 million renovation that included a mezzanine level and a stair tower to connect all three floors. Gone was the boxing ring on the third level. In its place was a state-of-the-art climbing wall, two squash courts and two racquetball courts. The building also received a second pool, Jacobs, which is still known affectionately as “the new pool” throughout the athletics department.

“At the time, everything we had was state-of-the-art,” Sterrett said. “We need to dream differently now.”

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**On** any given day, 550 to 700 Lehigh students, faculty and staff pass through the entrance lobby into Taylor Gym. No time slot is more popular than 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.

The cable crossover machine, beaming in the center of the gym like some old matador playing to the crowd, is the most popular destination on the lower floor, always accumulating a line of at least four or five gym goers.

“The thing that most bothers me is I end up having to completely alter my workout, cut things out and add things in because of the crowd and the lack of machines,” Greg Eudicone, ’07, said. “Pretty much all the cardio machines are out-of-date. We spend all this money in tuition and none of it ever goes to the student facilities. We’re not all D-1 athletes here. The rest of us just want to work out.”

The treadmills are perhaps the most sought after commodity in the gym. Reservations are made every half an hour from open to close. This practice came as a shock to Lisa Medico, ’08.

“I didn’t know anything about reservations,” Medico said. “I got on the treadmill for five seconds before a girl kicked me off. And when I tried to make a reservation for later in the day, everything was all booked.”

The reservation policy might work in theory but it’s more abused than used.

Sterrett is hoping to change all that. He envisions an online system similar to purchasing airline tickets. Logging in using their Lehigh identification numbers, students will be able to make reservations for treadmills and ellipticals prior to their arrival at the gym. At the same time, Taylor employees will know who cancels their appointments and will be able lock them out for future uses.

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**Cundey** Varsity House’s strength training facility was created two years ago for varsity athletes.

“It’s hard to expand the fitness center at Taylor, and if you can’t make it any bigger than you try to take a group out of the equation,” Sterrett said. “Theoretically, it should alleviate some of the stress and congestion.”

Instead of alleviating stress, in many ways, Cundey Varsity House, roughly twice the size of Taylor, has created additional stress. Many students feel alienated and bitter about their workout options compared to Cundey.

“I think I can speak for everyone when I say if we were allowed to work out there, everyone would drive up,” David Duane, '06, said. “That place is awesome.”

Duane speaks about Cundey like it's the eighth wonder of the world. And for Lehigh students used to working out at Taylor, it might as well be.

The backlash regarding the varsity house is compounded with the perception that varsity athletes use Taylor Gym to work out.

“Just look around,” Eudicone said. “The worst is when the crew team (a club sport for men) rolls in 15 or 20 deep and you can't even breathe anymore.”

Sterrett attributes the perception of varsity athletes “invading” Taylor to out of season athletes that occasionally use the gym to supplement the structured programs administered to them by their coaches at Cundey. The school doesn't encourage this and won't prohibit it either.

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**The** rack of dumbbells tucked away in the corner of Taylor shows weights that are numerous and varied, but the dumbbells themselves are discolored and rusty. The 45s jingle like Christmas bells each time you pick one up. Some handles are so worn they cut student's palms after 10 minutes. The harness on the rowing machine often gets jammed mid-thrust, rendering its user helpless and, sometimes, injured.

To make matters worse, users are forced to pay a fee for renting items, like racquetball and squash rackets and the balls that accompany them, \$1 for each item.

“I am disappointed how newcomers who do not have their own equipment have to pay to rent them while basketballs are free,” said David Chaitt, '07, an avid squash player who plays only as often as he can find an open court.

Lehigh has two squash courts. Lafayette College, half Lehigh's size, has four.

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**When** Liam Wall, '06, was making his college decision, the quality of the school's gym almost turned him into a Leopard.

“Lafayette's gym is superb,” Wall said. “When I visited, it almost sold me on the whole school, but I wanted something bigger.”

He got a bigger school, but not a bigger gym, which inherently makes little sense. Lehigh, roughly two times the size of Lafayette, has a smaller budget devoted to fitness and recreation.

Perhaps the huge difference has its roots in the athletic department's structure. Lehigh has one big department devoted to both athletics and recreational and fitness services. That means one committee is in charge of intercollegiate varsity club, intramural, recreational and instructional programs.

By contrast, Lafayette, like many schools today, has two distinct divisions, one delegated to fitness and recreational services and the other devoted to varsity athletics.

The director of recreational services at Lafayette, Jodie Frey, pointed out the convenience of having two departments devoted to fitness.

"You don't have the same tension as to how you spend your money," Frey said. "The goals of the athletics department are somewhat different than the goals of the fitness and recreational department. Because of this, it would make decision making very difficult since you have to please two groups."

Sterrett points out some of the drawbacks of having two separate groups devoted to athletics instead of one.

"You don't always get the best efficiency for all the programs involved," Sterrett said. "One example is Grace Hall. It has recreational and intramural uses, but at the same time, it is home to our wrestling and volleyball teams. It's multi-dimensional."

Another advantage Lafayette has is its unique replace and repair endowment toward the Allan P. Kirby Sports Center by the Kirby family donors. As a result, the oldest piece of equipment is only six years old.

"Every single year here we're replacing pieces," Frey said. "Even if it's only four years old, it gets replaced so we're able to sustain its quality once the newness wears off."

Sterrett says that the athletic department originally looked to endowments for gym resources, but the interest in fitness among students expanded way before Lehigh had a chance to keep pace.

Patriot League competitors Colgate University and Bucknell University, similar to Lafayette in size and tuition, also have bigger, more modern fitness centers than Lehigh.

Bucknell's 16,000-square-foot Krebs Family Fitness Center puts Taylor to shame. Add to that the 175 pieces of equipment of Krebs and Taylor looks more outdated than a foot-long cell phone.

Even Sterrett is quick to point out Taylor's shortcomings.

“We don’t have enough space and, as a result, we don’t have enough equipment for our total target population,” he said. “Some of the equipment is badly outdated. I don’t think the space dedicated for locker rooms is used actively enough or as effectively as we might use it.”

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***In*** an office cluttered with a growing bundle of folders, paperwork and old photographs of the Lehigh campus, Sterrett is anything but disorganized. A former All-American athlete, he speaks with a confident smile and eyes as animated as his vision for the future.

He is quick to come up with ways of implementing that vision on campus, offering insights ranging from the most extensive, ambitious projects (million-dollar additions to residence halls) to more routine ones (moving lockers and office space from Taylor’s administrative center to create room for its fitness center).

“There is so much that we can do, and we are only in the planning stages right now,” Sterrett said.

One option he came up with was leasing the gym’s equipment instead of buying it, which would address replacing issues. When the lease ends, the equipment could be replaced with newer models.

But leasing can’t solve all of Taylor Gym’s problems. The biggest issue, as Sterrett is quick to reveal, is a lack of space – and not just at Taylor. It seems Lehigh is expanding quicker than its campus can keep up.

“Even if we had a bucketful of money to throw at this problem, we still couldn’t solve it,” Sterrett said.

Instead, he brainstormed and came up with other ideas. One notion includes taking Grace Hall, which already sports a strip of rowing machines, and adding more equipment.

Another option is to create smaller fitness areas comparable to gyms located in hotels. They would most likely be located in each dormitory’s common area, freeing up space at Taylor and creating more fitness options for students than ever was possible before.

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***Anderson*** shrugged his shoulders and began to walk out the door and into the bustling traffic of Taylor Street, stopped short and turned around.

“I don’t know ... I guess I’ll have to take up swimming,” he said.

But that seems more unlikely than finding an open bench in the gym.

Outside Jacobs Pool is a sign that reads, "Pool Hours: 12-2 and 8:30-10:30 Monday-Friday."