

He's a believer

Local powerlifter enters gym biz with a mission

Paul Svoboda
The Intelligencer

Steve Stewart relishes a weighty challenge.

A former football star at Moira Secondary School and a one-time competitive bodybuilder, Stewart became a Paralympic powerlifter after recovering from injuries sustained in a car accident.

Since then, Stewart has competed at two Paralympic Games — in Barcelona in 1992 and Atlanta in 1996 — and he's pondering a shot at the 2000 Games in Sydney, Australia.

However, while he's demonstrated his fighting spirit when it comes to overcoming physical challenges, Stewart is now facing perhaps the biggest test of his determination and resolve.

Stewart recently took over the former Four C's Fitness Centre on Dundas Street East. He's renamed the facility Premier Fitness and Exercise Centre and he's currently supervising an ambitious makeover including a new aerobic studio and new weight training and fitness equipment.

Stewart admits with summer on the horizon it's a tough time of year to open a fitness facility.

"I'm going cautiously," he says, "I know it's a bad time of year to open. But I believe in what I'm doing."

Stewart believes a people-oriented atmosphere will help.

"We're really just trying to push a friendly environment," he says. "I'd like to have an environment where people encourage each other and one that's not intimidating."

In the latter vein, Stewart will not tolerate the so-called "muscle-head" image that has plagued some health clubs. He doesn't want over-aggressive, steroid-bloated gym monsters scaring away the everyday customer.

'You've got to do something to feel good.'

So far, he says, it's working. He says the new equipment and philosophy offers a broader experience.

"We're focusing on aerobics, the new studio, and we're trying to change it into a genuine fitness club rather than just strength-oriented," he says.

New staff should also help. Stewart is relying heavily on the expertise and experience of Erin Ronan, a university kinesiology graduate and national calibre collegiate volleyball player. She'll oversee individual fitness evaluations and programs.

"She's just excellent," says Stewart. "She can deal equally well with men and women. She's a real fitness type person."

"Wellness programs, fitness,

strength. Erin can implement all this stuff."

Meanwhile, at a time when most health clubs experience a decline in attendance due to the increased outdoor activities of summer, Stewart is introducing measures to combat the problem.

Those include summer specials, deals for seniors, sports specific training, one-on-one personal training programs and a potential partnership for dryland conditioning with various local teams like the OHL Belleville Bulls.

Today, with a plethora of fitness-related items and apparatus available through television infomercials and with exercise companies pushing home workouts, Stewart is steadfast in his belief there is still a place for health clubs in the community.

"Hey, the bottom line is that most of that (fitness equipment) ends up in the closet," he says. "The fitness centre is still viable."

Considering his background, it's perhaps not surprising that Stewart ended up in the gym business. He's been a dedicated barbell devotee since high school and, over the years, has come to appreciate the intrinsic value of fitness.

"When I got back from Atlanta (last year), I didn't work out for five months," he says. "I felt like crap. That convinced me that fitness is a way of life. Going over that 35-year old threshold, I'm convinced you need to do something."

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