

SURVIVING LOCKDOWN: REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Clubs in regional Victoria have finally come out of lockdown (hoorah!). Here are five who have emerged to tell the tale...



ON THE ROAD TO NORMAL



By Jamie Logue, Franchisee, Plus Fitness Shepparton

“ I’m not going to lie. It’s been extremely challenging.

As the local franchisee of Plus Fitness Shepparton we decided to do whatever we could to engage our members during lockdown. This included Facebook live workouts for free, and once we got the green light to deliver them, personal training and group training outside by the local lake; given the time of year, this was often in the rain and freezing cold!

We spent a lot of our time on the phone to the Department of Health and Human Services, Business Victoria, accountants and lawyers, trying to figure out if we would still have a business to return to!

The unknown factor was mentally challenging. Everyday I put on a brave face for my family, friends, members and the local community, telling them that we would bounce back. But on the inside, I wasn’t 100 per cent confident.

Since reopening it’s been good to see the members back; but due to the COVID Safety Marshall rules, we’ve had to get to the gym at 5.30am and stay onsite until 8pm for 7 days a week with reduced hours on the weekends.

I’m tired, I’m stressed, I’m frustrated and I just wish the Victorian Government would show some greater understanding. At the time of writing it’s been 11 days with no new cases but no change to the rules for operation - let us trade properly, already! ♦

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GOING ABOVE AND BEYOND FOR MEMBERS



Allison Everett, Owner/Sole Trader
Fitquest360, Ballarat

“ In March I heard the news of this COVID-19 thing, which I was oblivious to since I barely watch the news; my head is usually buried in my 50 amazing members and how *their* days are going. This is my life as a sole trader and the creator of my little fitness studio which we began almost five years ago on a grassy oval. The Fitquest360 “gym” isn’t actually a gym as such; we are a community – a group of people who I lead as a trainer/coach/personal support in their health and fitness journeys - and through life. This is why when we had to shut our doors (being classed under the same banner as anyone who had a fitness business) I went into overdrive, saying to myself “there’s only one thing I can do here. Keep everyone going because if I don’t show them that we can, I will be letting them all down.”

Aside from all the things as a business owner I needed to do (i.e., survive, pivot, develop new COVID-19 ways such as extra cleaning, new booking systems, reducing numbers when we opened, and hiring a contractor to help run sessions because I couldn’t be in two places at once. We trained outdoors when we had to, even training in the rain to keep members moving. And of course Zoom! Who *didn’t* get on to Zoom in this industry? To keep my strength training members going, I purchased TRX-type

suspension trainers and gifted them to my members, then I created a program to use them. I also changed our equipment-based classes to full-body workouts in our cardio sessions and we delivered them online. I even created COVID-19 fitness survival kits that I drove around and delivered door-to-door to my members! Plus, I had signwriting done to liven up the drab concrete walls, and I put up pictures of all my members around the room so that when they came back inside, they saw that it was not only the workouts I was working on, but I was also continuing to create a space and place that they would want to return to. For many members, this is the only “gym” they have ever been in, so it’s important they feel like it’s truly their space.

I laugh now, realising just how much into overdrive I went! I just kept going – proud and exhausted, I just kept going.

I must thank all my amazing members, including the new ones I welcomed online. I also must acknowledge my family who took the brunt of my many tears, fears and doubts, which I lobbed on them daily. It’s said that we are the sum of the five people we regularly surround ourselves with. But I have 50 incredible humans who I see every week, so it’s no wonder I pushed so hard to get through this time. ♦

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LAUNCHING A REBRAND AND SURVIVING A MEMBER TESTING POSITIVE



By Lee-Anne Martin & Tracey Robinson, Owners,
Elements Health & Fitness

“ In early February 2020, we completed a comprehensive rebrand of our business.

As part of the rebrand, we moved into a new building and filled the space with Life Fitness and Hammer Strength equipment.

Our official open day fell on the same weekend that all gyms were forced to shut their doors.

Immediately we suspended everyone’s memberships. We hired out our equipment to help people to continue to move. Within a week of closing we contacted every member and asked them if we could help them stay physically active from within their homes via a private Facebook group. We ended up with a weekly timetable of over 30 classes and this kept our members moving during the first three-month lockdown.

We opened again on 22 June (for six weeks).

During that time we had a member attend our facility for a spin class who later tested positive for COVID-19. Contact tracing for all other members in that class happened within minutes and we all self-isolated for 14 days.

From the time the member attended to the time we were informed of the active case by the

Department of Health and Human Services, we’d had approximately 400 visits in our facility. There was no transmission, which we credit to our strict cleaning and hygiene policies.

In early August we were told to close again, for Lockdown 2.0.

This time we set up a private Facebook group, again to help those members who wanted to continue moving while confined to their homes. Again, we hired out our equipment. This time we also ran weekly challenges with great prizes.

In Lockdown 2.0 we got tech savvy and implemented Zoom classes where everyone had to book and check-in upon commencement.

It’s been an incredibly hard year. Having spent countless hours getting our facility ready to open in February 2020, only to be told to close the doors with no idea of when we’d be able to reopen or how we’d pay our staff and bills. It was heartbreaking having to deliver outdoor personal training to clients during winter, when we have 900 square metres of indoor space!

We are very excited to be back – restricted, but back – and we’re ready to help our members again. ♦

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ENGAGEMENT IS THE KEY THROUGH LOCKDOWN



By Daniel Hickin, Regional Business Manager
Genesis Health and Fitness

“ When COVID-19 hit, we had to act quickly and make decisions based on what would be best for members and staff, whilst also being strategic about how best to equip ourselves for the future. Going into lockdown for a second time in Victoria, while the rest of the country continued to operate, felt like being the naughty school kid who had to stay behind for detention while your friends kicked the footy outside!

Quickly we turned our attention to engagement, giving members free access to our online platform: the Home Fitness Network, along with each club locally delivering a live class timetable on their social pages. This was supplemented by clubs renting out fitness equipment from the gym to members so they could increase their ability to have a great workout from home. We ran a free 28-day challenge for members and non-members in October, which saw more than 1,000 entrants taking part and confirming that even with the doors closed, member engagement was still alive and well!

Everything we did to engage our members proved to be the very thing that helped keep our staff engaged as well. Feedback from the instructors

and coaches taking the sessions, identified that this strategy gave them a daily and weekly routine, and they thrived on the social interaction achieved via the live classes.

Operationally, staff from Victoria helped the interstate clubs that were open by adding extra support as they reopened. Our regional team came together and worked on solutions and strategic planning to create a new environment. This helped everyone work through the complexities of reopening and enabled them to all feed off each other's positive energy and enthusiasm. This was also seen in our increased interactions with our franchisees, who we have worked consistently with and supported through each step of the lockdowns.

Did we get it right? Did anyone? What I do know is that being on the ground in Victorian-based clubs as they reopened, we saw members and prospects eager to get back to the gym. All of whom had a very clear understanding of the restrictions we need to follow. Similarly, the energy from our teams on the ground reflected how ready we all were to deliver a safe and motivating environment.

Now is when the hard work really starts! ♦



OUR BUSINESS HAS SUFFERED GREATLY



By Ian Coutts, Co-Owner
QuickFit Delacombe

“ The impact of the COVID-19 'second wave' lockdown in Victoria, on our business and mental health, has been significant and will be felt for a long time to come, especially due to the additional requirements now imposed on gyms. Our business has suffered greatly as a result of the tarnish that was applied to gyms, and even though we are now open, we are seeing many membership cancellations due to the public discourse about gyms being 'unsafe'.

Gyms have always placed a high priority on cleanliness but early on, following the arrival of COVID-19, at our own initiative we implemented additional hygiene measures (at our own cost), including hands free sanitisers, relocation of gym equipment to ensure 1.5m distance, additional cleaning protocols and also signage throughout the gym. We also developed our own COVID-safe plan long before it was an official requirement.

Now even when we have been allowed to open, the requirement (at least until 23 November 2020) to have COVID Marshalls onsite at all times, has placed an additional financial cost on our business, at the time when we can least afford it. We have had to employ staff to be onsite at all times (we have had to reduce our opening hours significantly as we cannot staff our gym 24/7) and bear the cost of these additional salaries.

Given our business structure, it also soon became apparent we would be ineligible for most grants available, as our personal trainer employees are subcontractors, and therefore not classified 'employees' as such. In fact, the only grant we have been able to apply for (Sole Trader Support Fund for \$3,000) has now been 'Under Assessment' for almost two months. It was also very disheartening to see specific support packages being released for other industries, but nothing for gyms and fitness centres.

All of the above has left deep psychological scars and questioning about the decision to go into the fitness industry in the first place and open our own gym. Only time will tell if we survive this upheaval, but the overall feeling of lack of support from the government (and even the denigrating the fitness industry) has left an overall feeling of disenfranchisement. We have been fortunate in having a understanding landlord where we are, but some of our other creditors (we had only been open 12 months, and so have significant loans relating to our gym equipment) have been less supportive and have kindly increased our payments to make up the almost six month pause we were forced to take.

During the lockdown, we undertook a number of initiatives to keep our members engaged virtually whilst we were unable to open our doors. This included setting up a dedicated 'Members Only' Facebook page, which included virtual workouts from our personal trainers, nutritional advice, and also mental health tips and support. We also undertook outdoor bootcamp sessions, when restrictions were eased enough to allow it.

Finally, I feel a voice that has also been left out of the conversation is from our members themselves. Just speaking to some of our members gives a greater appreciation and understanding of not only the physical benefits people get from going to the gym, but for most of them more importantly it is about maintaining their mental health also. I believe this point was ignored completely by Government and given little credence. It also appears a large amount of money will have been allocated to mental health support post-COVID-19 – what a shame this shows little recognition of the impact gyms have on positive mental health and that none of this initiative is to be directed towards supporting gyms and their members. ♦

