

IT'S GYM WARS ON THE
UPPER WEST SIDE AS THE BATTLE FOR
THE BICEPS HEATS UP

LEAN AND MEAN

BY
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NERGY, YOU KNOW, *energy*."

Danny Errico is inspired by his creation. Standing on a platform crammed with treadmills, he is surveying yet another throbbing rush hour at the Equinox Fitness Club, an orgy of gleaming metal and flesh. Errico, overcome by the tableau before him, rattles like a jackhammer—imagine *Glengarry Glen Ross* in a health club.

"Look, look! Guy over there—pumping, working. Cute girl walks in. *That's* what we're about! Motivate people, *motivate* people. Have fun, have *fun*."

Errico, along with his brother and sister, is owner of this fiercely hip and phenomenally successful sweat center on Amsterdam Avenue near 76th Street. But with his wavy, shoulder-length mane, pumped-up brava-do, and designer wardrobe, Errico is hardly just another jock, nor do his faithful treat him as such: As he strolls through the workout floor, he is glad-handed left and right by good-looking and glistening young men and women. Errico—muscles toned, mind alert—is where they want to be. At Equinox, at least, he is a king.

But kings, of course, must occasionally do battle, and Errico now finds himself in the midst of a turf war. It began when Equinox stomped on the toes of the Jeff Martin Studio—practically an aerobics institution—by opening right around the corner. And now World Gym is threatening to damage Equinox with its mammoth new club just down Broadway.

Meanwhile, sniping has broken out. As health clubs have left the medicine-ball era behind, they've become more like restaurants du jour, replete with clashes of loyalty, raiding of staffs, and, of course, spreading of rumors.

Take the story about the Cadillac that was parked outside Equinox for four days. Errico speculates that there was a World Gym

PHOTOGRAPHED BY TED HARDIN





Jeff Martin was the guru of aerobicists—until Equinox moved in.

“spy” inside the car. And then there’s the story of how the Erricos befriended Jeff Martin only to hire away half his staff when they opened up their own club. Or how Equinox employees passed out fliers in front of the new World Gym.

But back in his office, Errico declares that he doesn’t worry about the competition. “We are setting the standard in fitness, that I will say. And let everybody else try their best to”—he pauses to quiet the rattling of his saber—“to help set the standard.”

Touché.

Jeff Martin Studio and a few other aerobics classes—nothing as complete or sophisticated as what the Upper West Side’s conspicuous consumers demanded. The Jack LaLanne club, on Broadway near 75th Street, was far too cramped; Pumping Iron, just up the street, was too musclehead.

Then came Equinox. The Erricos opened in September 1991, and the stampede to join proved they were giving the neighborhood what it wanted: a gym that was serious about both weights and aerobics classes, with an eye toward style. Now, as World Gym unveils its 24-

squash and basketball courts, weights and aerobics classes, running tracks and a pool, and untold frills including a hair salon and restaurants. This facility, just north of Lincoln Center, is slated to open in the fall of 1994.

But way back when, just two years after Jane Fonda started climbing into leotards, the Upper West Side belonged to the Jeff Martin Studio. Martin had begun teaching basic aerobics in his apartment to friends, all of them in their bare feet. A dancer who figured that he’d never make it to Broadway, Martin opened a studio in 1981 on West 76th Street, where he’s been ever since.

Up a steep and very narrow stairway with garish red walls and faded fleurs-de-lis are two floors of exercise space that could be called, at best, shabby. Paint is peeling, chunks of ceiling are missing, the very air seems clammy.

But Martin’s high-energy workouts won him fans among celebrities and lay-

women alike (men have always been a minority); he became an aerobics guru. “In the glory days of the Jeff Martin Studio,” says one fitness instructor, “he could turn people away.”

The studio became an institution even though Martin himself could be a hot-head—charismatic, for certain, but egotistical, erratic, a bit of a bully. “Martin’s loyal to those he loves, but if he doesn’t love you, watch out,” says Roberta

AND **LEARN** **EQUINOX GAVE THE UPPER WEST SIDERS JUST WHAT THEY WANTED: A GYM WITH AN EYE FOR HIGH STYLE.** **MEAN**

NO ONE SEEMS TO KNOW why, but as the fitness craze swept New York, the Upper West Side came up short. While places like New York Health & Racquet Club put up sweat shops wherever yuppies worked, few bothered to build where so many of those folks lived.

In the beginning, there were only the

hour-a-day facility with 25,000 square feet of weights, aerobics, and even day care, Equinox braces for its first serious challenge. But it certainly won’t be the last: Crunch, the thriving fitness studio with two downtown branches, will open a third on West 83rd Street on October 1. And Reebok International, along with the company that developed the trend-setting Sports Club/LA, has just announced a six-floor über-gym with

Sirgutz, a wiry and straight-talking 35-year-old instructor who works for Martin, Equinox, and World Gym these days. "He's a great friend and a terrible enemy."

"There were times when I would be intimidating," admits Martin, 34, who speaks extraordinarily fast and is considerably less trim than one might expect of an aerobics pro. "I guess maybe because there's a lot of competition now, I'm nicer. It's genuine, though."

Among Martin's customers were the Erricos. Danny, 31, and his brother Vito, a year older, were both Upper West Siders and fitness junkies. So was Vito's twin sister, Lavinia, who had danced with the Rockettes for two years. Danny and Vito ran Bench Construction, buying and renovating Manhattan brownstones. As the real-estate market began to top out, they looked for alternatives. In October 1990, the three Erricos opened a health club in Westchester County. Ten months later, a press release announced that Westchester Health & Fitness was grossing \$80,000 a month.

The Erricos then turned their sights on that great untapped market: the Upper West Side. Meanwhile, they still took classes at Martin's studio, and Martin occasionally taught at their Westchester club. It was about here that things got interesting.

"The truth of the matter?" begins Martin, who seems giddy over the opportunity to tell his side of the story. "They told me they were into construction and real estate and they were going to help me find a better location and move. And I gave them my books, I gave them my lease, and they sent an accountant to see all my financials. I opened up everything for them. I've never spoken to them since the day Vito called me up and said, 'Jeff, good news, we found a location'—I *thought* for me."

"No, that never happened; I never saw his books," says Danny. "I mean, he discussed with us a little bit about it, but . . . he's totally, way off base. Jeff came up and taught classes in Westchester, so it wasn't like he didn't know what we were doing."

When Martin learned that the Erricos' site was just around the corner from his studio, he was not happy. He was even more unhappy when he learned that Equinox would include an aerobics studio; Martin and Equinox would plainly be going after the same dollar.

MARTIN SCRAMBLED TO ANTICIPATE and control the damage. He ripped out a locker room and put in some weight equipment. He let his employees know how displeased he would be if they were to teach at Equinox.

And, following Marianne Williamson's advice, he turned his fear into love.

Martin had discovered the self-help diva Williamson just before Equinox opened, which was just in time. For the defections were swift: Some of Martin's customers, a few of his instructors, even his P.R. man, bolted for Equinox.

Most important were the instructors, who are the real stars of the aerobics scene. Usually free-lance, often teaching at more than one club, they're followed, lemminglike, all over town by devoted students. Martin says that Equinox outright raided instructors—half from his studio and half from the Molly Fox Fitness Club. Ten years ago, Fox, a 38-year-old Californian, opened a studio downtown, where she has become a fixture. Says Martin: "Equinox went down there and hired away one of her instructors right in her own territory—in Molly's own juice bar. She just went berserk."

Danny Errico denies that playing such hardball was even necessary to attract top instructors.

"You just run an ad in the paper," he says, smiling. "And it's so easy, because everybody's so unhappy everywhere else."

As the defections mounted, Martin seethed and turned to Marianne Williamson. "I listen to the tapes every night, and I'll tell you one thing," he says, taking a deep breath. "If I had not been studying this when [Equinox] opened, I would have been ruthless. I'd go head-on, I'd go crazy. But I may change again. Hell, when I can't pay my rent, I may change."

So far, Martin can still pay his rent, although membership is down to about 1,400 from a peak of 2,000 just two years ago. That year, he says, the studio grossed about \$1 million. Still, Martin feels the worst may be over. And those who take classes at both Equinox and Martin's—even the very same class with the very same instructor—swear that the classes at Martin's are better, a combination of a more serious clientele and the studio's high-energy, low-glamour vibe.

Martin, though, has felt Equinox muscling in. He's teaching more classes himself to help trim the payroll and is keeping up with the times—and Equinox—by adding classes with boxing moves, hip-hop, and gospel music. He's also working at holding his tongue.

"I don't bad-mouth them, just because I realize I have to live on the same block," says Martin. "I hate to see when it gets to be a bidding war, like with hair salons. We are supposed to have a healthy environment around here. I don't really care if they do well or if they don't do well—I just hope I do well. And when I go home, I try not to walk in their direction."

DANNY ERRICO DOESN'T BAD-MOUTH Jeff Martin, either. Not much, at least. Which means Martin gets off easier than most competitors.

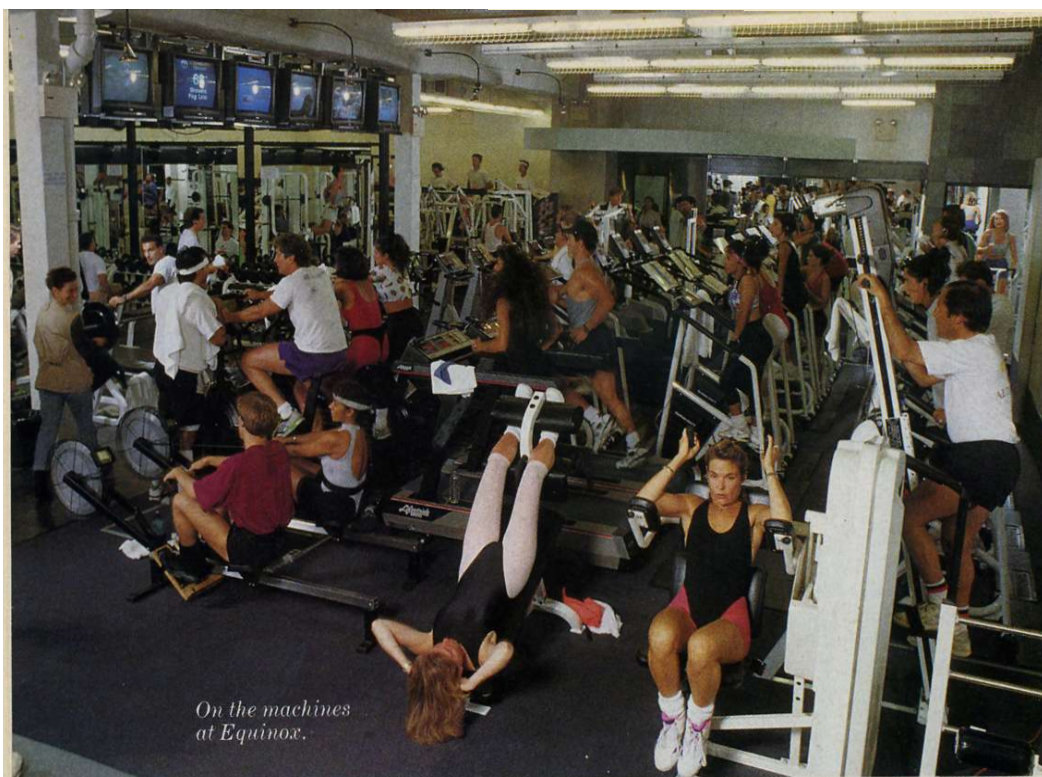
Errico accuses World Gym of installing some inferior equipment as well as spying from the Cadillac. ("Who else is it?" he wonders. "They're sitting out in front of the facility for a week with a note pad. I'm



Equinox is run by Lavinia, Vito (in the middle), and Danny Errico.

speculating, but. . .") He slams the Molly Fox Fitness Club for abandoning its strengths and for aping Equinox. ("Do you think that if some great Italian restaurant opened, Le Cirque would change to Italian? It's like, where's your vision? We know where ours is; where's yours?") And Errico has special words for the fitness kingpins whom he hopes Equinox will ultimately displace. ("Do you think the guy who owns the Vertical Club has ever worked out a day in his life? Do you think Manocherian, at New York Health & Racquet—he's never *seen* the inside of a health club.")

In fact, 60-year-old Fred Manocherian, who founded the company twenty years ago, says he swims and does hydrocalisthenics daily; his 26-year-old son, Greg, the chain's operating partner, competes in triathlons. "If [Errico] is there twenty years after he established his Equinox," says the elder Manocher-



On the machines
at Equinox.

ian, "I would suggest that he make those statements at that time."

But bad blood apparently makes for good business. Even before Equinox opened its doors, it had 1,000 members, some of whom had paid as much as \$1,200 for the initiation and annual fee. The Erricos claim that membership has since swollen to more than 3,000.

What they created was a health club with top-drawer weight-training and cardiovascular equipment, and smart design details meant to hook sophisticated New Yorkers. Done in black, white, and gray, the club is visually striking, and the Cardio-Theater even allows members to put on headphones and listen to any one of a bank of TVs above the workout floor. There's the hip juice bar and, next to the coat check, the sparkling changing rooms, whose mauve lockers were built twenty inches deep so that jackets wouldn't wrinkle.

"If *Details* magazine were to turn into a fitness club," says Peg Jordan, the editor of *American Fitness* magazine, "it would be Equinox."

Errico grins when he hears this; *Details* is his favorite magazine. "We wanted to get away from the dread of going to the dumpy, dreary gym," he says. "It motivates you from the minute you walk in the door. Nice, friendly, pretty girl at the reception counter. We really have a great pulse on what the market is."

So great do the Erricos consider their pulse that they are planning three more Equinoxes in Manhattan: on the Upper East Side, near Wall Street, and in the Flatiron district—right in Molly Fox's

neighborhood. The Erricos are also looking at Chicago and Los Angeles, whose fitness-and-fashion elite has already deemed an Equinox T-shirt prized booty. Future spinoffs include Equinox workout equipment, vitamins, and skin-care products. "We eat, sleep, and drink this," says Lavinia Errico, whose thirst for the business rivals Danny's. "Anybody can take a space and put in the same equipment. But it's the style, it's the attitude, and it comes from the top. It's the love, it's the passion."

All that love and passion, says Danny, has translated into more than \$3 million in gross income in Equinox's first year of operation. As for net profits, he will say only that Equinox is "well above" the industry standard and that the profit margin is rising monthly.

But all is not entirely well in the Erricos' kingdom. Despite Equinox's runaway success, there is some discontent. For one thing, it can become very crowded, especially during peak hours. One member, a 40-year-old photographer, complains about getting trapped by weight machines in one particularly tight corner.

Equinox has advertised itself at 11,000 square feet, but the building's landlord says the space is only 9,200. Danny Errico says the club is 9,850 square feet, with an additional 1,500 square feet of office space—upstairs, in the building next door. There is grumbling among some members that the promise of a membership ceiling has been ignored, and that a 7,000-square-foot expansion now set for next week has been far too long in coming. And even with the expansion, elbow

room may still be at a premium: The Erricos, who sell memberships as aggressively as they sell themselves, predict they'll have 5,000 paying customers before next September.

And then there are the Erricos themselves, and what many perceive as a cooler-than-thou attitude. (Besides the three principals, three more Errico siblings work at Equinox as well—one is in sales, another is a fitness instructor, and the third is a receptionist.) "There's just not an interest in taking care of the clientele once they have your money," says one member, the photographer. According to an ex-employee—a pretty young woman who worked at the reception desk for five

months—it's not much fun working for the Erricos, either. "Danny and Lavinia have terrible tempers," she says. "They'd be nice when you walked in, but there's no sincerity. They would just scream at you and degrade you and make you just feel like the scum of the earth. They would make people cry."

Equinox's charter members will see their yearlong hitch expire this month. In a business where the average club retains only one of three members, some will surely trade Equinox's sex appeal for a new home. And World Gym, just down the avenue, is licking its chops.

TONY SCHETTINO, WHO NOW OWNS three World Gym franchises in New York City, chuckles when he's asked about the Cadillac that supposedly sat outside Equinox for four days. "Who would that be?" he says. "I'm the only one here, and I don't have a Cadillac. I have a Saab."

Schettino, a beefy 45-year-old ex-cop from Queens, is as subdued as Danny Errico is brash. He's more inclined to operate on a hunch than to huddle with marketing and advertising and demographics advisers. Today, Schettino is hunkered down behind a desk in his basement office of the World Gym on Lafayette Street. On the wall outside is an autographed picture of Arnold Schwarzenegger, the owner of World Gym Licensing. Upstairs is the no-frills gym that attracted such a devoted crowd that Schettino was inspired to expand northward.

In fact, Schettino came very close to al-

ready having a gym on the Upper West Side. But Equinox got there first.

On this very desk, Schettino once had a lease for 344 Amsterdam Avenue, the Associated supermarket from which the Erricos created Equinox. According to Schettino, he was waiting until his lawyer returned to town to sign the lease when the Erricos swooped in, offered the landlord a sweeter deal, and rented the property.

Says Danny Errico, "There was a lease out, but a lease is not a lease until a deal is signed. We did not offer more money than they did."

David Leidy of Sackman Enterprises, the building's landlord, says that Schettino dragged his feet and that Equinox acted fast. "And Equinox offered a deal that was far more attractive to us," says Leidy.

Schettino says he's not thinking about Equinox now. "I don't ever open a business with a vicious intent," he says. "I just hope I'm as successful as they are, if they're doing good."

Schettino's biggest problem is what he calls "the monkey with the weights." The ubiquitous World Gym logo includes a grimacing gorilla caught in the throes of a power lift. And Schettino knows that that image won't work on the Upper West Side. Nor is the monkey what the uptown gym is all about.

Directly across from Lincoln Center, the new World Gym sprawls over the entire second floor of 1926 Broadway, between 64th and 65th Streets. Sunlight spills through the ten-foot-high windows lining three walls; blond wood and ficus trees round out the California feel that Schettino wanted. The workout areas for free weights (World Gym's traditional forte), Cybex machines, and cardiovascular equipment are cavernous but unspectacular. There is, though, a very un-World Gym surprise here: two large aerobics studios. "I don't know too much about the aerobics scene uptown," says Schettino. "I just know it's very popular." By hiring Dianne Feeney, a former partner of Jeff Martin's, as his fitness director, Schettino has made it clear that this World Gym will pose stiff competition for both Martin and Equinox. There are other amenities that make sense for the Upper West Side: day care, a health-food café, and 24-hour service, which Schettino hopes will appeal to

newsies from nearby ABC, late-shift restaurant workers, perhaps even the odd violinist who's just finished a bit of Mozart across the street.

While the downtown World, says Schettino, has about 2,500 members and grosses more than \$1 million a year, he's looking for even bigger numbers at Lincoln Center.

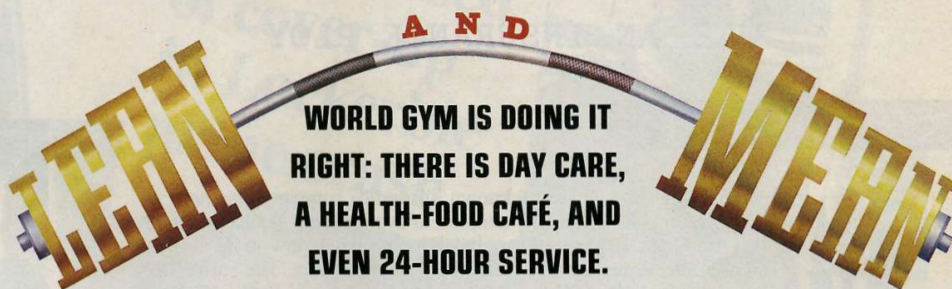
Schettino had started bodybuilding as a high-school junior in 1962. He visited L.A. often after he became a New York City cop, and took a liking to the legendary Gold's Gym and its owner, Joe Gold, who would launch World Gym in 1976. In 1978, Schettino opened his own gym in Middle Village, Queens. Five years later, it became one of the first World Gym franchises. The Lafayette Street gym, which he opened in 1988, moved a bit further from the old-line muscle factory. And

manager; now she'll be Schettino's right-hand woman for both Manhattan World Gyms.

"People are always shocked that I'm managing World Gym," says Wong, "because they expect this big, buff-looking guy. But that's not what World Gym's about. At least not in New York City."

BUT WILL THE PUBLIC KNOW THAT World Gym is not just for muscleheads anymore? At a flat rate of \$700 a year, World is far cheaper than Equinox, but just prior to opening on July 20, World had signed up only 300 members, compared with Equinox's preopening blitz of 1,000.

Still, plenty of attention is being paid. A nearby branch of the New York Sports Club dropped notes in its aerobics



now Joe Gold himself might have a hard time recognizing the new Lincoln Center site as a World Gym.

If Gold and Schwarzenegger and the monkey with the weights are the old World Gym, then Karen Wong is the new. Wong, a petite 23-year-old from Queens, was a Barnard student when she began working out at the downtown World. In less than two years, she went from customer to receptionist to

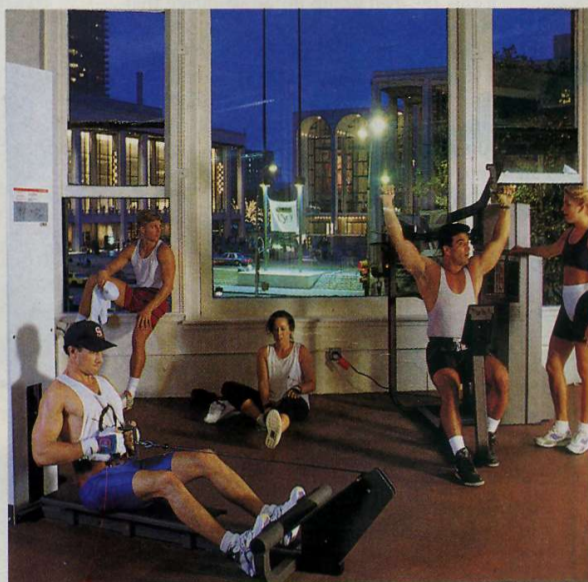
instructors' paychecks, according to one man who taught there, declaring that teaching at World Gym would be grounds for dismissal.

As for Jeff Martin, he's got other worries. "I think the people that are now going to Equinox to use weights will go to World Gym," he says. "Then Equinox will become my direct competition, because if people aren't going there for weights, what are they going for? Aerobics. And that's supposed to be my kingdom."

Even Danny Errico, who claims not to look over his shoulder at anybody, was sitting at his desk on a sterling summer afternoon, fingering a World Gym flier. It's a simple flier: a fact sheet on one side, a bold invitation on the other (WHAT THE UPPER WEST SIDE HAS BEEN WAITING FOR . . .). Errico sneers at the flier—its blocky type, its unsophisticated graphics. He pulls out a new Equinox flier, which is beautifully typeset, full of photographs, as slick as Errico himself.

"When you make the comparison," he says, "there is no comparison."

Words have been spoken; sabers have been rattled. Let the gym wars begin. ■



Great bodies, great views at the World Gym.