

A workout without the commute

High-end homes put the gym (or court) inside

By Jeffrey Steele

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Has it seemed easier lately to find an available treadmill, an unused free weight or an empty locker at your health club? It might not be your imagination.

In newly-built upscale homes, particularly those designed for families, fitness rooms, workout areas, mirror-and-bar-bedecked ballet studios and even squash courts are becoming almost as common as plasma TVs and granite countertops.

And why not? Imagine the gas and time savings in not having to schlep yourself and your children to separate fitness facilities. And picture, too, the health benefits your kids will derive throughout life from growing up astraddle a stationary bike instead of in front of a Nintendo console. No wonder home designers are replacing easy chairs with ellipticals, recliners with recumbent bikes and Barcaloungers with basketball hoops.

Designers and builders seem unanimous in their belief that interest in home fitness facilities has surged in the past couple years. "People are striving to create a whole environment in their house that is a healthy environment for their family," says Jamie Myers, designer with Susan Fredman Design Group, a Chicago interior design firm.

"A home gym really does fit into that. This has been showing up a little stronger in the last five years, and real strong in the last couple."

The trend points not just

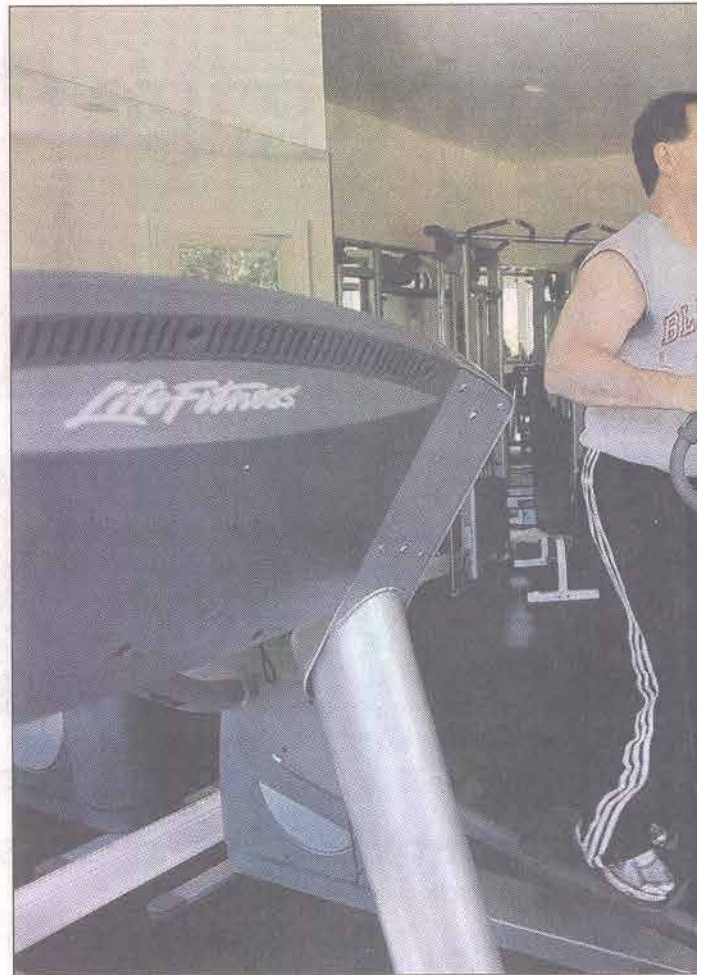
to more fitness rooms, but to more elaborate facilities as well. At Lincolnshire's Orren Pickell Designers and Builders, a firm focused on high-end luxury homes, associate principal Jason DeBaker says his company has always built one or two homes annually with home fitness centers that went beyond mere exercise rooms. "But in the last year or so, we've come across four or five projects where people have wanted interior basketball courts, dance studios, squash courts, batting cages, golf simulators and much larger exercise facilities," he said.

Designers and builders report the types of home workout areas they build are as unique as their clients' own distinctive fitness regimens. Jeff Samuels, president of Northbrook's Samuels Homes, recalls one custom home in Highland Park featuring a second-floor fitness room as part of the master suite. That room is situated right under the roof, which boasts an ornate pitch and unique detailing. "We translated that inside, to give the ceiling great height and a lot of interesting angles," Samuels said.

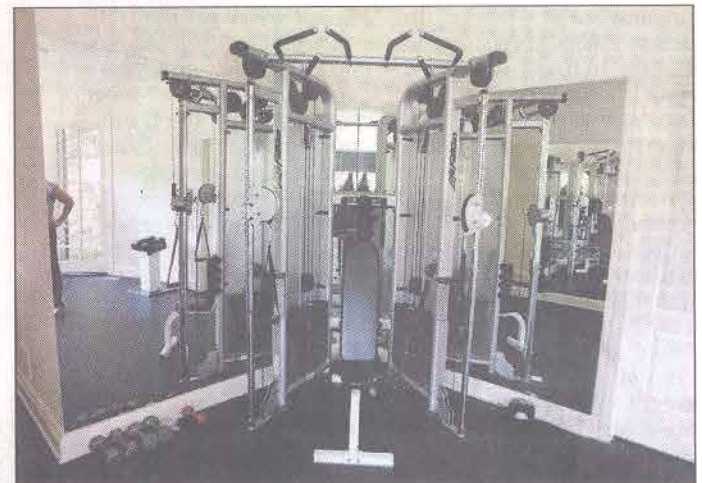
"It made sense to have the exercise room next to the master bath, which gives [the homeowners] immediate access to the steam shower, body sprays and rain dome."

One remarkable North Shore custom home created by Winnetka's Charles Page Architects features two gyms, one for the adults and one for the family's four athletic children, said principal Charles Page, who also owns Charles Page Builders.

The children's gym, designed for two sons and two daughters 10 to college age, is on the home's lower level, which also features a wine



Mick Meiselman works out in the gym of his Winnetka home. Char gyms—one for adults and another for the family's four children. M



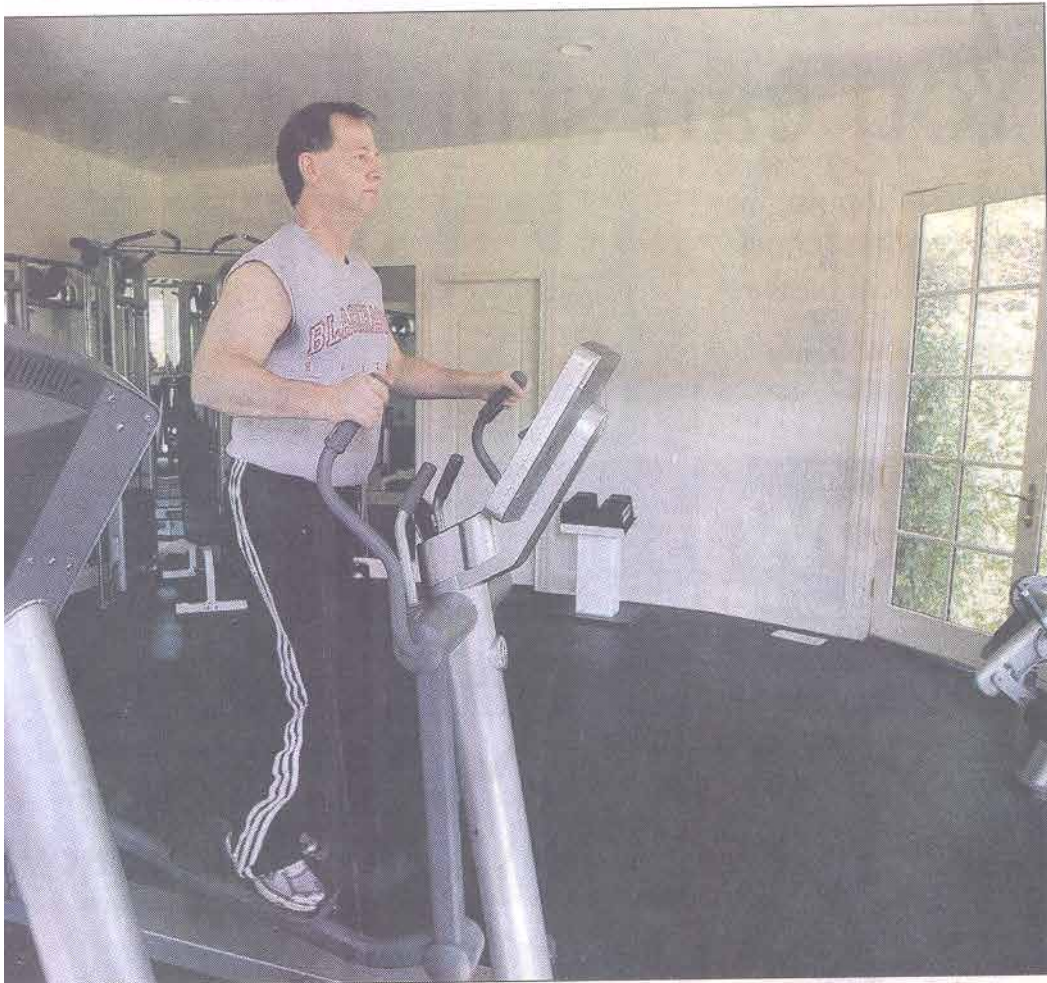
The Meiselman's gym doesn't skimp on equipment and offers views of the home's wooded lot.

room, recreation room, home theater and game room beneath its 10-foot-high ceiling. This gym is large, airy and adjacent to a convenient powder room. "The adults' gym is large and glamorous, a big round space with windows overlooking a beautiful private wooded site," Page said.

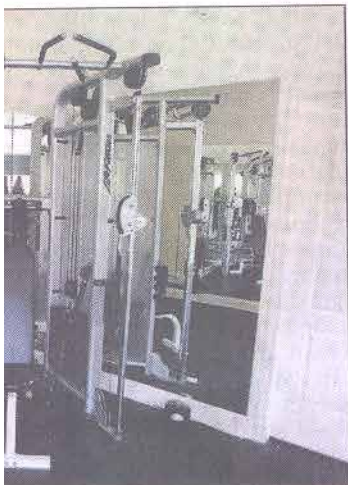
Pickell Designers and Builders has created half-

court basketball courts both in the garages and basements of its homes. "If it's a simple basketball court or a general area for the children to play in, we'll put it in the garage," DeBaker said.

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gym of his Winnetka home. Charles Page Architects designed the Meiselman's home with two for the family's four children. MILBERT O. BROWN/TRIBUNE



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"We'll vault the garage ceiling, use high-line garage door tracks so the tracks rise parallel to the ceiling vault, then incorporate a specialty floor coating to give it a

little more traction than the typical garage floor."

The upside of this approach is the space can double as garage or workout area. The downside is only a modified half-basketball court can fit in a garage, DeBaker said.

To get around that problem, it's more common to create true half-court hoops areas in basements of custom homes, he added. That necessitates digging part of the basement to a normal depth of 10 feet, and part to ultra-deep 22-foot depths. The deeper area houses the court, and can also accommodate a collapsible batting cage.

The shallower part of the basement provides areas supportive of the basketball facility by serving as a place for locker rooms, shower rooms and a court overlook. In some homes, this shallow basement area also houses the homeowners' golf simulators.

In city homes, limited space makes it vital a single workout area accommodate

different kinds of exercise. For one family's Lincoln Park dream home, Susan Fredman Design Group created a downstairs exercise room featuring three state-of-the-art pieces of equipment, along with yoga mats and free weights. Linked to the room is a beautifully-tiled steam room, Myers said.

"Radiant heated floors are the preferred choice in the basement basketball configuration," DeBaker said. "It's easier to use that approach than to blow warm air from a forced air heater down 22 feet from the ceiling."

As fitness moves from health clubs into homes, some builders believe home spaces will become more multi-functional, providing something for every family member. "The scope of these areas is expanding," DeBaker said. "Rather than requesting just a golf simulator or just an exercise room, they're combining all of them in a big sports court area, to make it a focus for the family's time together."