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## Washington County

### Programmed health

#### Virtual gym gets people moving to interactive sights, sounds

Sunday, September 17, 2006

By Lynda Guydon Taylor, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Tanner Shepherd jumped gleefully up and down on a rubber mat, following the lead of the on-screen robot in front of him. As he jumped, balls bobbing above the robot's head popped like balloons.

Each jump was aimed at hitting a ball before it fell to the floor on the video.

Never knowing where or when the next ball might drop, Tanner, 4, was all over the mat, trying to keep balls in the air and working up a sweat.

New to the Mon Valley YMCA's virtual reality gym, Tanner did not want to leave the room and was eager to try each of the six pieces of interactive equipment. And that's the point: Keeping children engaged in exercise.

The virtual gym weds interactive equipment with video games and is intended to keep children married to exercise for life.

Mon Valley in Carroll is the first Y in Western Pennsylvania to offer a virtual reality gym, or v-gym for short, although the concept is not new to the exercise world,



Robert J. Pavuchak, Post-Gazette

**Tanner Shepherd, 4, jumps in front of the Trazer, making the robot on the screen jump, as Delaney Davis, 4, watches in the new virtual gym at the Mon Valley YMCA. Both children are from Charleroi.**

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according to Bill Holzapfel, the Y's wellness director.

"We all agreed that this would attract more kids, particularly the market we're looking for, the ones that don't exercise," Mr. Holzapfel said.

The Y's target couch potato market is middle-school children.

A grand opening of the v-gym is planned Oct. 14, and U.S. Rep. Tim Murphy, R-Upper St. Clair, is expected to attend. He helped secure the \$50,000 Department of Health and Human Services grant to buy equipment and get the program up and running.

It's no secret the numbers of overweight and obese Americans are reaching epidemic proportions, with poor diet and lack of exercise tipping the scales. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 15.3 percent of children age 6 to 11 were overweight in 1999 and 2000, the latest years for which figures were available. From 1963 to 1970, the rate was 4.2 percent.

More than one-third of young people in ninth through 12th grades do not regularly participate in vigorous physical activity. Furthermore, 43 percent of students in those grades are parked in front of a television more than two hours daily.

Mr. Holzapfel cited statistics, gathered from multiple resources, indicating obesity and diabetes top the list of the five fastest growing health concerns in the United States.

To eat away at the grim statistics, Mon Valley received the federal grant to start the Improve My Picture program to address childhood obesity. The program, which includes the virtual reality equipment, will involve nutritional counseling, behavior modification, and take into consideration baseline measurements of fitness and body composition.

"The beauty of this is that it's a lot of fun. You're not just on a treadmill running on a straight line," Mr. Holzapfel said.

Clearly, there's nothing humdrum about the equipment.

The Y's fitness armory includes the Trazer, manufactured by Cybex; the Kilowatt, made by Powergrid Fitness; Sportwall, made by Sportwall Interactive Fitness and Athletic Equipment; the Gamebike, by Cateye; and Dance Dance Revolution, by DDRGame.

The Mon Valley Y renovated the virtual reality room over the summer. One wall is splashed with bright red, blue and yellow as if someone had flicked a paintbrush across the surface.

Demonstrating Kilowatt, Mr. Holzapfel stood with his back resting against a short post and his hands gripped around a giant joy stick

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positioned about waist level.

By moving the joy stick, the user controls the video game and develops overall body strength, especially the upper body. It is similar to an isometric exercise. The game Mr. Holzapfel played involved navigating a speedboat through a waterway. The harder he worked, the better he did in the game.

A workout of another sort is gained using the Gamebike. In this case, a stationary bike is linked to a race car-themed game. The harder one works the faster the car goes around the track.

On the other hand, Dance Dance Revolution keeps a player in constant motion by stepping on lighted arrows on a floor pad.

The interactive equipment measures resting heart rate, exercised heart rate, quickness and agility. It's also geared to a generation raised on video games.

Although Mr. Holzapfel knows of no other Y in the region or state offering the interactive equipment, there are other YMCAs getting into this new concept. Take, for instance, YMCA South Hampton Roads with 14 branches stretching from the Eastern Shore of Virginia to North Carolina. They installed equipment in January.

South Hampton Roads upgrades its equipment every three years and puts on a sort of trade show allowing members to test it, said Jenna Meyers, communications coordinator. The interactive equipment made members' wish list.

While the Y has no hard evidence about its popularity, Ms. Meyers said, some branches have had to increase their hours or add more machines. The Y also promotes use by families, which gets young people and parents competing. Children have one up on the adults because they already are familiar with the games, she said.

Although the video technology is intended for young people, it's also



Robert J. Pavuchak, Post-Gazette

**Bill Holzapfel, wellness director of the Mon Valley Y, works out on the Sportwall in the new virtual gym at the facility. The Sportwall, is a multistation system training for tennis, soccer, baseball, basketball, lacrosse, hockey, football and volleyball.**

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

attractive to adults, Mr. Holzapfel said.

Whatever the age, once a player gets the gist of it and gets into the game, he or she has a great time and a great workout, he said.

Another slightly less high-tech game is the Sportwall, which is designed to stimulate the body and brain. A wall panel is punctuated by circles of light. Players throw grapefruit-sized bean bags at the lights. When a bag hits, sound goes off and the light goes out and another light goes on. A player also can use a styrofoam rod or "noodle" to strike the lights at arm's length. The exercise involves a cardiovascular workout and develops hand, feet, ear and eye coordination.

The sportwall can be played in teams or individually. A sign over the doorway to the v-gym reads "With Sportwall, fitness is child's play."

Touche.

"There's so much you can do with it. Just use your imagination," Mr. Holzapfel said.

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