# Gays and gyms, a match made in heaven



In contemporary American fitness culture, the connection between gay identity and gym spaces has become deeply intertwined. What historically began as clandestine spaces for the LGBTQ+ community to safely engage socially and sexually, now evolves as open arenas where fitness and identity converge for many in the community.

Historically, fitness gyms acted as informal social clubs for LGBTQ+ individuals, especially during the pre-Stonewall era when overt socialising for gay individuals was largely prohibited. These sex-segregated fitness clubs became havens for both sexual and social discovery.

Prominent figures in gay nightlife, such as John Blair, played a pivotal role in evolving these spaces. In the 1970s, Blair opened Body Center in Los Angeles, which was recognised as the city’s first gay gym. As he recalled in a 2012 interview with The New York Times, the gym was characterised by early Nautilus machines, minimal attire including tiny shorts and tube socks, and the constant presence of Abba music.

Today's gyms continue to reflect the deep-rooted connection with gay culture, extending beyond the stereotypical ‘dudebros’ to environments where LGBTQ+ members can find community and expression. As Mark Harris described in his New York Times Style Magazine essay, the line between gym and gay nightclub can sometimes seem blurred. Whether working out or dancing, these spaces often share common elements such as loud music, mirrors, and an atmosphere charged with potential social interaction.

Natalia Mehlman Petrzela also highlighted this relationship in her Slate essay, pointing out that contemporary fitness spaces from CrossFit to Curves might be unrecognisable without the influence of gay culture. The American fitness landscape today remains significantly shaped by the contributions and presence of the LGBTQ+ community.

While the gym can be a space for physical enhancement, for many gay individuals it is also an environment rife with social dynamics and anxieties. Social media platforms such as X are replete with humorous and relatable musings from gay gym-goers. For instance, user @charliebeddoez expressed the distraction caused by musical trivia at the gym, while @go0ley humorously commented on the sacrifices made in workout wear for style.

The interaction dynamics are also explored, as @provocident described the side-eye performances in trying to gauge who else in the gym might be gay, and @elazie\_ humorously remarked on the need to cross legs even at the chest press. Other tweets ponder whether attention from others is due to attraction or confusion over gym routines, as @t\_kobs experienced concerns over being misperceived when a girl in spandex thought he was staring.

The commentary extends to the mental mapping of who else might be gay at the gym based purely on interactions, observational cues, and gym attire. @duda\_\_hanna playfully questioned the double reasons behind being physically fit—from aesthetic or just fitness purposes.

The narrative of shared cultural elements, as seen with users blasting Abba through headphones or the peculiar idea of muscle gays ignoring each other perhaps due to varying social reasons, reflects a unique cultural fabric.The common theme remains that these spaces, although fraught with personal anxieties and complexities, also offer a sense of community and belonging for many within the LGBTQ+ community.

From historical havens to modern-day inclusive spaces, the relationship between fitness culture and gay identity continues to reflect both a history of covert existence and the celebration of open social interactivity.