

GYMS OF THE WORLD – by Will Reno, Northwestern University

I spend most of my leisure time in what other people call my work but I call my fun. From time to time I've also been found in a gym, neither for leisure nor for work. It is not about ease and comfort. It is about perseverance and endurance, which can have the effect of giving one a sense of difficulties that disappear and obstacles that vanish. Gyms also are expressions of the cultures of the places where they are found, and thus it is fun to experience each and compare them, as I do here on this page.

The Home Gym



This is the Henry Crown Sports Pavilion at Northwestern University, or at least what an artist wants you to think it looks like. It is very big facility that in the 2010s cost about a quarter billion dollars to construct, so it seems like it should have great equipment. It does have all that, but that's for the athletes. The rest of the students, faculty and some members of the

community use an OK gym, which has everything that a gym needs. But one would think that a Big Ten university would have more than one decline bench press and more than one leg extension machine. There are more kiddie programs these days too, so sometimes the locker room smells like baby pee. They ought to give simple toilets among the faculty a discount on the \$400 annual fee. The place sure is convenient though, and the staff is great. These are gigantic positives.

Northwestern University once had an awesome gym officially called Patton Gym, but its real name was Stinky Gym. That gym was full of free weights and half-century old racks and rugged benches, some with jagged metal edges. Tragically, it was closed down in stages, from 2016 to 2018. Most patrons were north campus dudes and a few bad-ass campus cops. There was no air conditioning. One hot day a student fainted and weights crashed down. It's amazing that the university avoided litigation (that I know of). Students brought music on discs or mp3 until about 2012 when earbuds came in. It was mostly heavy metal until 2008, then like a switch flipping, it shifted to suburban and nerdcore hip hop and rap. The day it closed was the day that Northwestern University broke my heart. It was said that the weights and other equipment were donated to the Smithsonian Institution and was integrated into an exhibit, like the one with the dinosaurs and cavemen that shows you how people used to live back in the olden days.

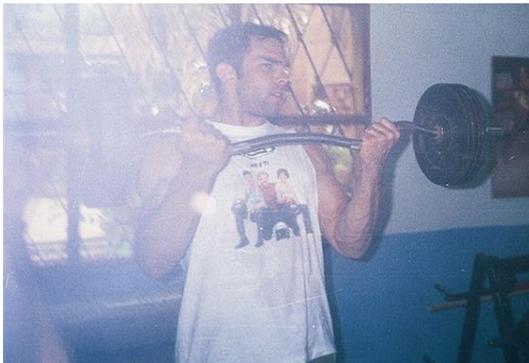


That's me doing upside-down sit-ups on parallel bars in Stinky Gym. The set-up for this exercise doesn't exist anymore at Northwestern University, not that that's a thing with me. Nope. Not me. The photo doesn't capture the stench or the charming shabbiness of the place; really kept the crowds down. A memorable feature of that gym

was the large sheets of (lead based?) paint that were peeling off the walls. Why was water dripping from that pipe on the ceiling, exposed of course, every time you heard a flush from the floor above? There was so much equipment down there though. I miss that place!

There are many other gyms that I've encountered during work / fun, and the rest of this essay explores some of the more interesting features of those places. Most are located in countries that one of our president called, well, you know (this is a family PG essay). What DJT didn't tell you and what these gyms demonstrate is that people around the world derive similar pleasures and satisfaction from hanging out in gyms. It's kind of that way with sports in general, like when I was walking through a boring national museum in a West African country with lots of dusty masks—not that there's anything wrong with masks, so haters back off—until a guard directed me to the “good stuff” upstairs, where he gave me a tour of photos and artifacts of the country's folk style *Lutte Traditionnelle* wrestling. He said I could get Made-in-China masks at the airport, but that I needed to learn about the great Fodé Doussouba (*sans frappe*) and Bory Patar (*avec frappe*) and many other. But I promised gyms of the world, and here they are.

5000 Miles East-southeast of America (defined as Chicago)



This photo is from 2002, when Northwestern University had a study-abroad program in this country which now deals with a rather serious conflict and definitely is not a destination for our study abroad students now. Back in that day, a few in our group and I walked from the hotel (*avec air-con*) where I stayed when not supervising students (*sans air-con*), crossed the sewage canal, to meet with others at the very

basic gym in this photo. The guy in the photo is a former student who is now a famous professor and sensei in Canada. Y'all, this isn't just about me. There were few patrons, mainly of Lebanese dudes on weights and a few older Lebanese women who used the few stationary bikes. There was no air-conditioning, and I don't recall how much it cost to visit the place. This was during the rainy season, which meant that the temperature wasn't so high, maybe 32 or 33°C, but it was **intensely humid** and sweaty, dew points similar to a gym I came to know years later at Maxwell AFB down in Montgomery, Alabama.

In the intervening years to this photo in 2018 the country's situation had deteriorated. There was factional fighting in the North, and trouble in The Disputed Zone. Pacts were broken and peace agreements unraveled. Returning to that country in 2018 and many after were correlated but not causal. Meanwhile, the gym situation had improved! That can happen when the International Community piles in, particularly Internationals who advise locals how to fight and who fly big Antonov aircraft that the contractors for the UN use these days. This gym is not air conditioned, but that isn't a problem. It's a bear in rainy season, but it's amazing what you can do, exercise-wise, when it's 45°C and the humidity is like negative-something percent in March. The dust storms suck but you hardly notice them indoors. The gym has a combination of the local elite sports culture and the Internationals concerned about waistlines after months and months in the chow lines. There's music, mostly from the Booty Channel (A+ Ivoire, etc.) that amazingly plays the same songs that I hear when I return to the Northwestern University gym. Doja Cat, Tyga – Juicy was big on the Booty Channel in December 2019.



Look at me making a muscle! Pretty nice! Not a cheap place by local standards; CFA



10,000 per week, but that comes with showers. Bring your own serviette. If you want something basic, try the gym in the photo above that is located in a facility about 5km from the fancy gym. On second thought, you need an invitation to visit that gym. Those plates are car parts. That works, but it's hard to repurpose metal bars to have good grips. The general vibe in the first gyms is women who embracing their natural curves and guys pursuing martial arts objectives. The second gym is all guys wearing the same outfits.

7,000 Miles East of America

It is undeniable that this next country has problems! It also has gyms, and a significant gym culture among urban young men. I regret not snapping a photo of the scene of the woman in a burqa walking beneath a billboard of a barely clothed professional bodybuilder who turned his body into a chemical factory. This photo was taken in a gym in a neighborhood called Microrayon. I seriously doubt that the gym had a commercial relationship with the well-known American brand. The gym was guys-only, and most of the patrons watched Pakistani music videos, clips of Bollywood stars, and themselves *very closely* in the many mirrors around the place. The friendly proprietor insisted that there was no charge, “maybe later”. To cut the story short, word came indirectly that the gym did not need customers who attracted the attention of the sheriff of the night, which is a good indication of who really was in control in that neighborhood, a mere 1km from the fortified walls of the embassy of a significant Western power. The replacement gym was more basic setup, but that one closed suddenly in August 2021.



8,200 Miles East-Southeast of America



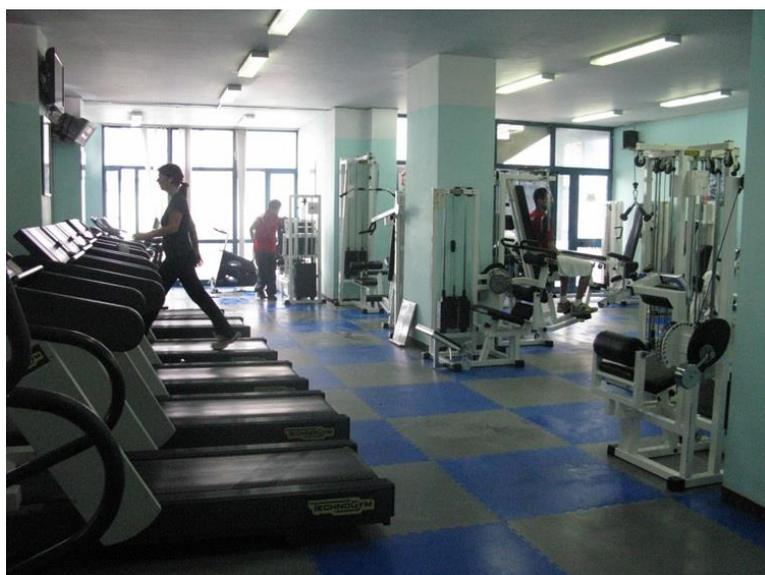
This gym was located at the top of a hill in a country in which, sadly, there has been no effective central government for the past three decades. Or more accurately, those who are most proficient at building an effective government aren't the people that much of the rest of the world wants.

This gym charged no fee! Weights mostly were cement-filled buckets. There was no air conditioning and no music. Often there is a breeze, but the situation was explosive from time to time.

The principal patrons of this gym were foreign soldiers, most from the “pearl” of that continent. One of their jobs was to guard the “government.” That’s a stressful job in that country because that involves protecting the “government” from itself in addition to protecting it from the insurgents. Sometimes it’s difficult to know which are what! A few patrons confided that some of the earlier patrons were fortunate to have found positions with outfits that got them jobs abroad that paid a lot more than their country’s army could pay. In any event, this gym went out of business one day; in an intensely loud flash, as it were. That happen in bad neighborhoods. There are other gyms in that city, many that cater to the martial arts crowd. But these are not gyms for foreigners! It’s not a matter of hospitality. It’s a complicated issue.

7,500 Miles East of America

This gym, photo to the right, located on a busy street in the in downtown of a big city, was a decent basic gym with free weights and a few machines; nothing that relies on electricity to run. It was all business; lots of martial arts (Kimura-style Brazilian jujitsu) and an absence of chemical assistance. The ambiance was that you could wear your underwear on the outside and no one cared. There was an almost total absence of mirrors; tired old air conditioners. This gym had loud music, with a decidedly older heavy metal (think Drowning Pool – “Let the Bodies Hit the Floor”) and speedmetal (Kreator – “Phantom Antichrist”) preference. The



price was right; a per-visit fee of Rs 200 (less than US\$ 2).

7,800 Miles East-Southeast of America

This one on the left is one of my favorites. It was a huge privilege to work out in a gym that includes elite world-famous runners among its patrons. “See that guy over there? Guess how many Olympic gold

medals he won.” The gym was fairly basic, with a world class staff who were friendly yet business-like with advice. This was a pay-as-you-go gym (for short-termers), about US \$3 per visit. It was a great place to unwind after visiting the gym in the country next door that doesn’t have an effective government (except for the jihadists, of course).

7,174 Miles East-Southeast of America



This gym was well-run, with good basic equipment and a busy class schedule. No aircon needed in this uplands tropical climate. The view was great. That’s a golf course in Center City! There was no music, but there was occasional banging as the gym expanded into other rooms. Visiting over several years, one could watch it grow.... Until the big malls took over! You see, Century City was the place to be back in the day. But now the big properties have taken over the

clientele. There’s Acacia Mall, with its upscale vibe and its health clubs that really are not gyms. In fact, everything and everyone is beautiful in Acacia Mall. But this gym, or its site, at least, is too good a location to struggle like that. The re-developers are moving in, with big plans for the Garden City – Nakumat Oasis Mall revitalization. Shopping as we knew it is dying on that continent, replaced with a different experience. What will it mean for the continent’s gyms?

Don’t be deceived. Not everyone is moving to the malls. This gym, photo to the left, was found in the northern part of the country in an area that used to have an insurgent



group that said it was inspired by the 10 Commandments. You can guess that there wasn’t any air conditioning, and I must say, it gets hot in that region of the country. There was no fee either. Indeed, it didn’t seem that the gym had any other patrons. The decline bench worked, and as readers will know, this gym had precisely as many decline benches as the Big Ten University gym has at present!

6,400 Miles East of America

This gym is in the heart of a bustling city, conveniently located near the al-Kadhimiya pilgrimage route. I'm glad that repairs to that mosque have gone well. Many revere the site, and it is the burial place of several very famous scholars. In any event, it's important for a gym to be near a pilgrimage route because the savvy patron can benefit from pilgrimage organizers' very generous custom of providing free meat-on-a-stick and lentil soup! This is EXCELLENT and for a moment made me think that I had found the best country in the world. Let's be honest though, and remember the triple car bomb attack on that holy site, and others that filled cemeteries with children. Let there be no compulsion in religion. But I digress.



This gym is a place to unwind in a part of the city that isn't divided by sect. It is well-equipped, even if machines and free weights were packed in tight. The music is subdued, and women are among the patrons. I wonder what women think about the décor? I think I saw the model for that painting. The fee per-visit is reasonable; IQD 5,000, no complaints. It is a lot better place to exercise than the (free) rooftop alternative where we were staying, a gym-in-a-box. It also is a good complement to the extensive cardio that comes with constant walking to get to various parts of the very large city. Taxis are not the safest option for some reason, and it isn't a good idea to be stuck at checkpoints. Keepin' it left of boom. At least one can try to find advantage (cardio workouts) amidst adversity (filthy terrorists).

The Emergency Gyms

The story is not complete without an account of the viral challenges presented to gyms worldwide. This is a tale of two worlds. One world dealt with a terrible pandemic that was most unpleasant. The other world, not so much. Gyms help one to interpret the deeper meaning of these experiences:



This is the new home gym, as in literally the gym in a home. The Heartland State shut down on 13 March 2020 and by early 2022 still had not completely opened-up. Back in '20, subtle signs were there well before suburban supermarket toilet paper flew off shelves. By late February it had that familiar feel like, you know, when a provincial capital falls, top government officials leave the country for “medical treatment”, and no one knows the new guys at the neighborhood roadblock. But signs were unfamiliar to the less seasoned. There was instead what one might call *Zähigkeitsunverträglichkeit*. That is, if faced with a scary situation, do anything to make it go away! The meme would be a red circle with a slash superimposed on a primary school or other unimportant gathering place.

America also is home to *Play it Again Sports*, where you should show your ID and ask for the discount. Necessary equipment was procured well before 13 March. By then there was no discount! Air travel became positively luxurious, with entire aircraft to oneself. To fly across the Atlantic in one's very own wide-body jet aircraft! These flights were the tenuous link to the other world, as we see in due course.

Just like in the Disputed Zone, do-it-yourself American gyms require flexibility and hustle, déjà vu all over again. Our university's ROTC had outdoor equipment! Wood pillars holding the parallel bars were a little bit rotten, and tape on the pullup bars may have been unclean. Fortunately, hockey tape wasn't stocked in the toilet paper isle. Hardship came with rows of calluses and pullup proficiency that a Marine Staff Sergeant would be hard pressed to criticize. Outdoor exercise was not forbidden, unlike in our big city neighbor that posted police to protect citizens from unwinding in windswept lakefront parks.



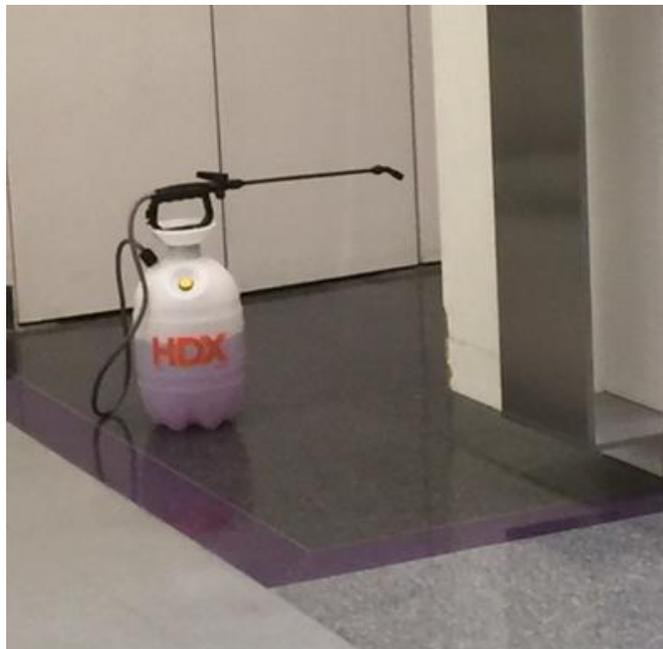


In September 2020, the original Home Gym opened, but not for students! It was like those trans-Atlantic flights—empty! But showers? Too dangerous! Since the virus was absent from the lakeshore north of the city line, the lake (conveniently located adjacent to the gym) was the shower. This was fine when it's 30 C but less fine into November. By December the ice shelf became too treacherous, though a work

colleague and her friends had a system they used through the entire winter.

Less seasoned readers may be surprised to learn that 2020 was a year of other disasters. A terrible indoor weed infestation nearly descended upon us! Our Home Gym was ground zero. Weeds are costly pests because they compete for light, water, and nutrients. What a joy to see the regular application of herbicides on benches and weights between gym “appointments”. More sensitive patrons only imagined the chemical burns. Actuality, herbicides are an important component of today’s weed management systems and can reduce labor costs. This is doubly so when yield is threatened with the rapid growth rates of weeds. Besides, only lesser used weights got sticky with residue from repeated applications. That gym does not apply herbicides now, despite the absence of extensive cover crops. This goes to show the timely identification of a viable pre-emergence application solution can provide a *sound foundation* for season-long weed control. While late-emerging weeds should not be ignored since they can produce significant quantities of seeds, the effort to keep the gym open was appreciated—hugely! Thank you, staff! The music—think a weird PG version of *Need to Know* (Doja Cat) and BTS *Dynamite*

Now for the other world: An (increasingly congested) airplane flight





away (and numerous PCR tests of varying degrees of authenticity, sincere attestations [e.g., print only on A4 paper of pinkish hue], official clearances, fees [US dollars only, no change] to acquire documents of indeterminable purpose), was a different world. At least it seemed that way. Many hours were spent in this gym 6,400 miles east of America, deep underground to shield it from the intense summer heat, a serious risk that might freak out even a resident of Yuma, AZ. Those gym patrons were *Weicheiunverträglichkeit*, that is, managing inevitable risks around them, like 48 C and sunny, every day. They study risks carefully and apply common sense to build resilience. Weather that can kill you is the backdrop. Then comes: #1: violent religious extremists. #1a, IEDs, # 2: kidnapping. #3: horrible pollution. #4 bad drivers. #5: sharp rusty metal. #6: unexploded HE-T. #7 roadside roast chicken almost killed you. #8 exposed 240 voltage

wiring. #9 hideous virus. At least it's better than Lebanon. Somehow approximately 99% of people there remained friendly and welcoming. Not much ice to break when it's 48 outside. Even so, gyms are great places to start.

The patrons of this nighttime gym 5,800 miles east-southeast of America were confused about reports of a virus. "Oh yes, *that* disease!" That gym did fine without herbicides. The more pressing concerns included (1) regular power to run the fan to relieve suffocating heat, and (2) ever more powerful pesticides. Yeah, yeah, they have their problems, but at least there are gyms and they remember Chuck Norris. Now there they have a new local industry to supply travel-worthy PCR tests with guaranteed results. There are special regulations for arrivals from the US and EU 😊 such as \$150 mandatory PCR tests (electronic payment to the First Lady's personal account) and 10-day quarantine in the "government" hotel that the president's son runs. That's right, baby, that stuff isn't going away anytime soon!

