

GYMTOPIA

A Place Where Clubs Do Social Good

By Toni Krasicki



'Utopia' is defined as an ideal, or perfect place, but how about 'Gymtopia'? Ray Algar, founder of a newly launched digital 'story telling' platform for the global fitness industry, says he came up with the unusual name Gymtopia as to him it 'describes the 'perfect' gym – a place where remarkable things take place, both inside and outside of the club.' Launched in June 2013, the site endeavours to capture the social impact projects that are taking place around the globe that have been implemented by health clubs but more specifically by the members themselves.

Whether it involves generating funding to provide opportunities for the underprivileged to get involved in sports or supporting a charity in their life-saving research, locally, nationally or internationally, the sharing of 'social good' projects is a way to simply get more people involved and tap into the fitness community.

At this early stage, the Australian Fitness Industry is yet to come onboard but word is spreading, especially with the help of advocates such as Justin Tamsett at Active Management. WNIF caught up with Ray to find out more about Gymtopia and what he hopes to achieve by launching the site.

WNIF: How do you define Gymtopia?

RA: Gymtopia is a digital 'story telling' platform for the global fitness club industry capturing the social impact projects that are taking place. These are stories that

explain how the health and fitness industry (clubs and suppliers) is collaborating with members to collect food, raise money, donate shoes, and give clothing and many other projects that create a positive social impact. The stories I discover are inspiring and people are often surprised when I share them. The response is often: 'I did not realise fitness clubs cared about these things'. So, the big idea around Gymtopia is to collect all these global social impact projects, these 'stories' that clubs and industry suppliers are leading, and put them in a single place on the web where they become more 'discoverable'.

WNIF: How and why did you start to think about Gymtopia?

RA: For many years I have been thinking about how the fitness club can become an important and valued part of its community, valued in the same way that the

community view the local school, library or football team. In other words, a fitness club that is embedded into the centre or 'heart' of the community rather than seen as sitting on the edge and perceived as simply 'taking' from the community.

The idea for Gymtopia came to me when I was speaking with Richard Bilton, President of Companhia Athletica at the 2012 IHRSA Fitness Brasil Conference in Sao Paulo. Richard was telling me about a shoe collection project their clubs had started. The simple idea was to ask members to bring in their old gym shoes when they were about to replace them. The shoes were laundered, bagged and passed to Symap, a Brazilian charity providing running training to individuals who could not afford to buy specialist-training shoes. Companhia Athletica collected 700 pairs of shoes to kick-start the project and is now collecting just under 4,000 pairs each year. I was fascinated by Richard's project for several reasons:

- How big could this shoe project become if other clubs around the world were inspired to get involved? It does not take long for the idea to spread and create momentum.
- Clubs are themselves significant and influential communities that can be harnessed to create any type of social impact that they passionately care about. For example, Planet Fitness, the US-based budget gym operator now has more than 3.5 million members, which is larger than the combined population of Perth and Adelaide. If you ask 3.5 million people to participate in a simple 'act of kindness' the result can be extraordinary.
- Why are these inspiring and socially worthwhile club projects not more 'discoverable' by others around the world? I was finding out about them by accident.

So the idea I had that day was to 'capture' all these stories and put them in a single place on the web so that they travel globally. Gymtopia is the result.

WNIF: What's the easiest and quickest way the Australian fitness industry can get involved?

RA: A club or supplier visits the Gymtopia website at www.Gymtopia.org and completes a free one-time registration. Once registered, an organisation can then submit its project.

Gymtopia wants to publish projects or stories that focus on benefiting an external community, not members of a fitness club. There is a short online form to complete that explains the project and how it has helped a community at either a local, national or international level. Some of the questions we ask are:

- How did the project start?
- What were the project objectives?

- Why is this project important?
- What was the impact of the project? In other words, what difference has been made to a community?

We ask for some photographs as this helps to tell the story and bring it alive. I receive the project via Gymtopia; proofread it to ensure it reads well and then publish it on Gymtopia for the world to see. Organisations around the world then read about it and are inspired to start their own project. Clubs of all sizes will have a project they are proud of, so please share it with us on Gymtopia.

WNIF: What difference do you hope Gymtopia will make to the lives of health club owners and their members?

RA: I am hoping that everyone feels more 'connected'. Members feel more connected to staff and the club, while the club feels more connected to its community. Feeling genuinely connected really matters because relationships are deeper. Connected members will care more about the club, keep their membership for longer, attend more often and spend more, over time. Give me to the end of 2013 to research this and I will come back with some evidence to support these claims.

WNIF: What is your goal with Gymtopia i.e. how many gym goers, club owners do you hope to have involved?

RA: Globally, there are around 153,000 clubs so theoretically there should be no shortage of inspiring stories for Gymtopia to capture and share. However, I also want Gymtopia to encourage the industry to start more projects and build strong links with charities and other social enterprises that can act as delivery partners.

WNIF: Have you found that a pattern has evolved in the types of causes that are the most popular?

RA: We have ten distinct types of 'good causes' on Gymtopia. To date, I would say that projects falling into the 'Medical Research' category are the most popular. For example, Virgin Active in the UK works closely with the 'Sparks' children's charity, funding life-saving research into conditions affecting babies, children and pregnant mothers. Since 2011, they have raised \$402,000 (AUD).

Ray Algar is the Managing Director of Oxygen Consulting, a company that provides strategic business insights for organisations connected to the global health and fitness industry and founder of Gymtopia. Ray can be contacted at Ray@Gymtopia.org or to become involved and share your club's story go to www.gymtopia.org