



CLUB SPORTIF

HOW I STOPPED WORRYING AND LEARNED TO LOVE MY GYM

by Nora Jaffary



Before joining it, I thought the Montreal Athletic Association (Club Sportif MAA) was pretty much off-limits. Feeling like an imposter, I had been inside a couple of times when I played with an interclub squash league; used the floral shower gel, the programmable lockers, the towel from a stack someone else had laundered. But when the publicly minded YMCA permanently shuttered, it looked like if I wanted to access a gym with courts near work, then it was the MAA for me.

Established in 1881, the Club was originally called the Montreal Amateur Athletic Association, at a time when ‘amateur sports’ meant athletic activities for people sufficiently wealthy they didn’t need to earn money from participating. The Club has occupied its present location in the Golden Square Mile on Peel Street at Sherbrooke since 1905. With its columns, crests, and symmetry, the façade reprieves the original Beaux-Arts design, while once inside the heavy oak and brass doors, patrons pass into a double-height lobby. Slabs of white marble form a staircase ascending to seven studios on the third floor and downtown Montreal’s only indoor 25-metre pool on the fourth. There is also a massive gym filled with squadrons of treadmills and weight machines in the southern wing of the main floor. En route there, you pass a black leather bench the size of a Muskoka dock. Nobody ever sits on it.

Recent renovations have maintained a smattering of elements from the original building: stained glass windows (snowshoers, lacrosse players) are visible from the reception desk and from the bistro, and walls on several floors are covered by massive pixilated images of past patrons and more importantly, sports heroes: tobogganers at the winter carnival, the first winners of the Stanley Cup (1893), Canada’s first Olympic gold medalist, Etienne Desmarteau (weight throwing, 1904). On my way to fitness classes, I am cheered by a wall of women laboring in unison on their abs. Their clothing looks 1940s. (Were women allowed to wear shorts in the 40s?) I can’t find out when the MAA started letting women in. Or black people. But they had apparently done so by the end of WWII.

So, what does \$235.70 per month plus an extra \$34.49 for access to the squash courts buy? It has all the regular stuff: the gyms, the spinning classes, the hot tub, the steam room, one studio filled with sandbags for those who like to box; one featuring harnesses that descend from the ceiling for those who want to learn circus gymnastics (!) I have not sampled all of these options, but here is why I keep renewing my membership despite my sheepishness.

First, there are the instructors. Yvon Provencal, the squash pro, trains the best players in Canada. For years, he coached Canada’s team for the Pan-American games; he now coaches David Baillargeon, the third-ranked player in the country. Squash pros from all the Clubs in town come to Yvon for their own instruction. But most impressively of all, he gives equal care to them as to the long-legged eleven-year-old girls whose eager parents have signed them up for his sessions. Also, I have never sweated as much in my life as in Caroline Leclair’s “total sculpt” and “bootcamp” classes. You can see every sinew in the body of this trainer who channels both Julie Andrews and Sigourney Weaver (badass Ripley) when she urges us to ‘push harder!’ She has a cult following, mainly female – adolescents through retirees – and, occasionally, a very muscly hedge fund manager.

Despite the perspiration, this gym actually smells good. I wondered if the scented ghosts of the wealthy past patrons were somehow responsible, so I asked. In fact, a discrete infuser consistently pumps out whiffs of lavender mist next to the 2nd floor staircase.

What you want most from the pool is room to stretch out in buoyant bliss and here, banked by a wall of windows and next to a terrace, it’s almost always empty. Usually, I have an entire lane to myself. And I have never encountered such cheerful lifeguards.

When I was shopping around for a gym, the sales manager at a competing club (the Midtown “Sanctuaire”) informed me with an oblivious smile that there they priced guest passes outrageously high “so our members know attendance is truly exclusive.” The MAA’s tack differs slightly: Every employee – the graduate students working reception, the jacked instructors, the cleaners who speak little English and less French, who open our lockers when we forget the combination—everyone gets a free membership as a perk of employment, and they all sweat and soak along with the rest of us. So yes, the MAA is an edifice of privilege, but it’s a nice one.