

Forum

The snowiest winter in recent memory couldn't freeze the community's reception of the Simon Center. Since it opened in January, the building has become the campus's social mecca, drawing people out of their residence halls, classrooms, and offices to see what created the buzz of conversation. In the process, a fitness wave has covered the university almost as completely as the blankets of snow.

Nothing got in the way of the exercisers learning how to use the new facility to the fullest. Even on days the university had to close due to weather, the center opened. Before a weight was pressed or a start button pushed, there was a half-hour orientation video that described the machines in the Health Fitness Center. In the Forum, some players with weak ankles learned why running sneakers, not designed for lateral motion, had no place on a basketball court. Still others were told by their bodies to slow down the pace. "There were a lot of sore muscles on campus," said senior Michelle Stranza, a student trainer for varsity athletes.

The distinctive ping of racquetballs reverberated in time with the splatter of squash balls smacking against the white walls of the courts, which have only begun to show the tell-tale marks where the balls have hit. In the Health Fitness Center, the mechanical whirring of the treadmills and stair machines has become so familiar that exercisers hardly notice it when they remove the Walkman headphones from their ears. Only the thud of basketballs on the green synthetic turf floor of the Forum sounded off for those accustomed to a wooden court.

Throughout, an air of clean newness permeated the building. The lines of the track were bright and distinct. The durable blue seats on the bleachers suggested comfortable evenings at future conferences. Lights shone brightly on the players moving about on the floor. Even the green ventilation pipes outlining the ceiling looked inviting, somehow. "The whole place has this shine; I can't explain it," said senior Manolo Maese.

Bernadette Briamonte, a first-year working at the equipment desk downstairs, noticed most the regular influx of people. "I love working here," she said while handing racquetball equipment and goggles to a pair of graduate students. "It's like a social center. The interaction with the entire community is just great. She explained that the building really pulses with activity on the weekends when graduate students, staff, and faculty arrive with their families. "People bring their children, and they get a better sense of the community and everyone coming together."

Initially, some of the students were pessimistic, but that faded as soon as people saw what the center held. "I was surprised when it actually opened up in January," said Stranza. "Everything was up and running. The machines were actually here, and the pool was filled. There didn't seem to be anything missing." The atmosphere at Drew changed overnight, added junior Cara Williams, who plays on both the women's lacrosse and field hockey teams. "Everyone is excited, and it's one thing on campus we can all be proud of."

A headline in *The Acorn* predicted "Give it Two Weeks," but the health craze on campus has shown little sign of abating. Every night, the fitness center, the free weight room, the courts, and the Forum have been busy, and the community has happily scheduled gym time into their daily routines.

"I work the 3-6 shift," said fitness center instructor Marie Aufiero, a sophomore, "and I see a lot of the same faces. In fact, the number has not decreased; it's increased." The numbers of new sneakers and exercise outfits have increased as well, joked senior Angela Savino, captain of the women's basketball team. T-shirts and shorts, ponytails, knee wraps, and portable tape players have become as common as congratulations at commencement. But what is most noticeable is that people are happy. "I haven't heard one complaint," said senior Tracey Lee.

Varsity teams have enjoyed the chance to work out in a comfortable atmosphere where they can focus on the sport rather than the weather. "It's fun the practice here," said Greg Colonna, a freshman and member of the men's lacrosse team. "It's become a part of everyday life, but we still look forward to coming in. You can't be bored here." Junior Sarah Marcus, who plays on the women's lacrosse team, explained that the ability for the teams to practice and train year-round "will definitely make us stronger. This opens up more opportunities for running all year and weight lifting."

Movable blue drapes that hang from the ceiling encircle the courts like a giant shower curtain and separate the playing grounds. The curtains protect varsity and non-varsity athletes from loose balls and let teams play simultaneously.

Williams has also noticed an increased number of students and members of the community watching the teams practice and offering their support. "Hopefully that will mean more people will come to our games after they've seen us practice here," she said. Athletes added that the new facility has brought a resurgence of pride to varsity teams. "For once, when visiting teams come here, we can be proud of our facility and not embarrassed by it," said Williams. "If you're a student athlete deciding whether to come here, you set foot in this place and it's a whole new outlook."

First year student Chandra Lynch, who lifeguards at the pool and is a member of the field hockey team, echoed William's remarks. "We had recruits up a few weeks ago, and when they saw this place you should have seen how wide their eyes got."

The eight lane, 25 yard pool certainly adds a new dimension to Drew, with swimming classes and scuba lessons planned for the future. Moreover, two more teams will soon call the university home. Aquatics Director Patrick Mead is currently recruiting members for the men's and women's swimming teams, which will begin as a club sport in the fall of '94.

Returning to the renovated and expanded Baldwin gym after two seasons without a place to call their own, the men's basketball team seemed revitalized in front of the home fans. On the new hardwood, the Rangers won their first two games. And, despite a 7-17 finish overall, they posted a winning record at Baldwin. "Once we started playing here, we had a home court advantage," said junior Bill Bogardus.

Eventually, of course, scuff marks will color the racquetball court walls. The turf will fade under heavy traffic areas, and dust will settle on the ventilation pipes. A new class of Drew students will join the community, never having known the campus without the Simon center. The seniors who have been using it every day of their final semester will graduate. The newness will diminish. But that's OK too. Slowly, the Simon Center will feel familiar, and maybe, *just maybe*, the warm sense of community it sparked will grow stronger. One thing is certain: At Drew, the winter of '94 will be remembered for much more than the weather.

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