

Tune In, Log On, Work Out



Keeping the body active alongside the mind is a common goal for a university, but through a new recreation center and its high-tech components, Minnesota State Mankato has a jump, pump and

slam-dunk over the others.

In the mid-1960s, Mankato State College's Highland Arena was an exciting, brand-new building that housed its share of significant firsts. Former athletic trainer Gordy Graham remembers how, for several years, Highland contained Minnesota's only indoor track. Graham himself started, at the college, the first athletic training education program in the United States.

But as the song says, there's a season to everything, and in 1998 after nearly forty years, Otto Arena (renamed in honor of the University's great athletic director and Graham's boss, Bob Otto) appeared to be in its fall. And its function as the University's athletic hub ended when plans were launched for construction of the multimillion-dollar Taylor Center complex, which by 2000 would shift major sports out of Otto Arena and into the brand new Bresnan Arena.

Today, what has become of Otto Arena is nothing short of a full-circle, *deja vu* jump-back to the days of being brand-spanking-new, alive with promise and, likely, another first. A multibuilding makeover that began with the Taylor Center construction has been capped with the \$8.4 million renovation of the Otto Recreation Center, the formal opening of which took place on Saturday, Oct. 1 — in the heart of Homecoming 2005.

That Saturday morning, a few hours before the Homecoming game, was an ideal time to introduce the "new" recreation facility to the community and to alumni in particular. As it would be explained by Minnesota State Mankato President Richard Davenport, Campus Recreation Director Todd Pfingsten, benefactor and alumnus Glen Taylor and others at the formal opening, the Otto Center was evidence of the University's commitment to providing its students with more than a passable time working out or shooting hoops. This was a building that suited the needs of students by being accessible and comfortable, and suited the needs of the University by serving as a dynamic tool for recruiting and retaining students.

The building's \$8.4 million renovation includes new flooring, three basketball/volleyball courts, a jogging track, cardio fitness area, weight room, remodeled locker rooms and a student lounge.

By far the most celebrated component of the new center is what the University has dubbed Tech-Rec machines, two of which were on display during the Homecoming gathering. These machines were the show-stealers at the Oct. 1 opening, in and of themselves worthy of all the speeches, ribbons, the theme from Rocky, etc. Another first, the Tech-Recs are nowhere else to be found, developed at Minnesota State Mankato as a marriage of popular technology and fitness, ideally lending itself to the age-old collegiate goal of tending to mind and body.

Sharp Programming

The Tech-Rec machines, forty of which are installed along the perimeter of the Center's upper level, are bikes and treadmills equipped with computers, keyboards and monitors. For today's student looking to work up a mild sweat, hitting the treadmill for an hour can now also involve checking and sending e-mail, watching a sitcom or DVD, surfing the Internet, or checking MavDisk for any school work needing a second look — all activities that ordinarily take place with as little physical movement as possible.

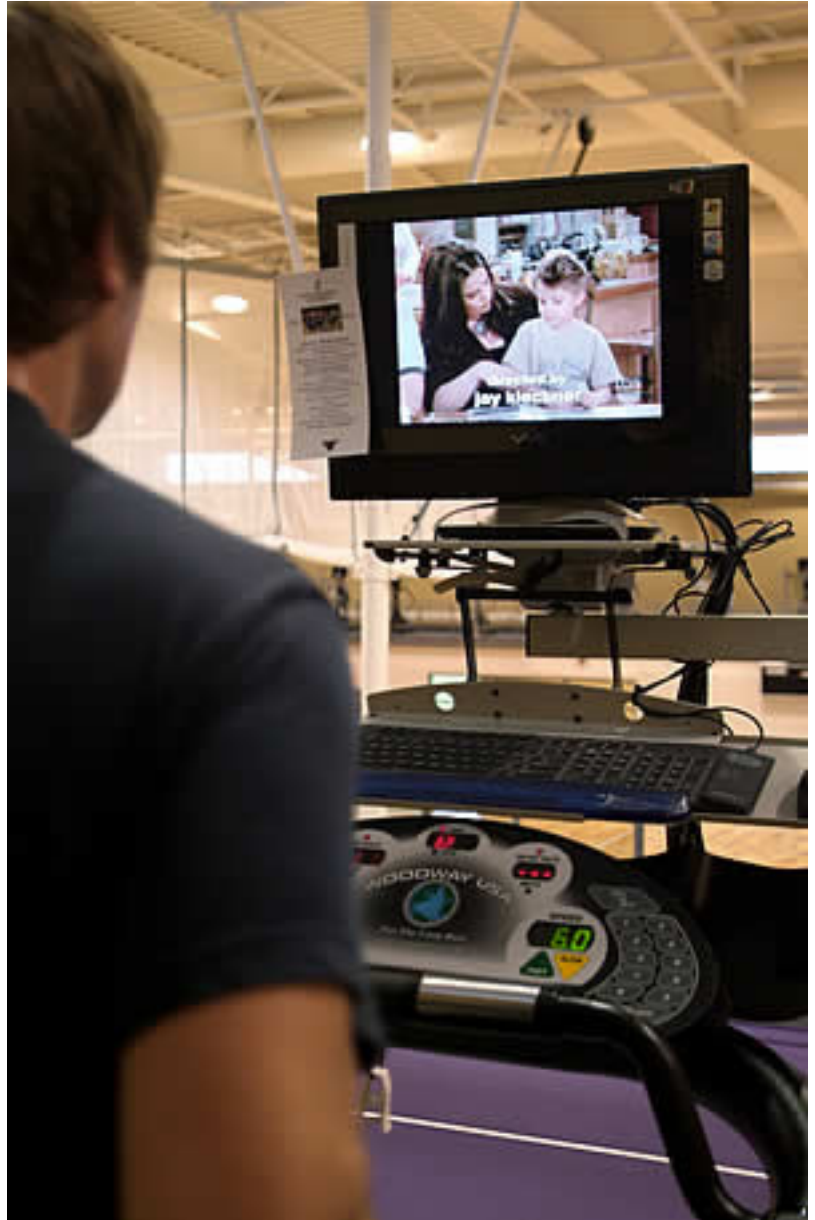
As simple as they sound — exercise machines equipped with a TV-computer combo — the Tech-Recs are the only such machines in use throughout the country. Once the idea for this kind of machine was suggested, Wayne Sharp said he figured it was a matter of writing a check.

"We were hoping to buy something, not necessarily build," says Sharp, Academic Computer Center director. But research around the country revealed nothing along the lines of what Minnesota State Mankato's recreation, ITS and human performance staff decided they wanted.

What they developed, and what the student body received in these high-tech machines, was another first in the nation.

Sharp recalls the Tech-Rec idea taking off from a lunch with Human Performance Professor Kent Kalm, Pfingsten, and Vice President and CIO Mark Johnson. Initially, it was a meeting to discuss the idea of getting monitor screens for each piece of exercise equipment. But as the conversation continued, it became clear that what was being discussed was something far more novel than what anyone at the table had seen before — the challenge of which, Sharp said, thrilled him.

"I was just getting warm fuzzies and all excited for where our discussions were going," Sharp says. Kalm and Pfingsten made a proposal for what would become the Tech-Rec concept, and ITS vowed to give \$150,000 to the project.



"I about fell out of my chair," Pfingsten says.

In building prototypes, Sharp said, the biggest challenge was to make the programming efficient and easy for the students to use. What the student sees at each station is a monitor with twelve options — including the Internet, cable television, their University e-mail accounts and their MavDisk, where school work can be stored and accessed. The goal of this interface was, Sharp says, the simpler the better.

"We just want them to be able to touch something and have it show up," Sharp says. Another challenge was finding the right equipment for the job — too often the best they could find were computers to which televisions could be attached. The breakthrough was finding a Sony product that fit the bill perfectly — essentially a computer with a television inside.

The forty machines were just starting to be installed during the first weeks of October, and in that time curiosity was running heavy among Minnesota State Mankato students. "Just in the word of mouth that's getting around, there's excitement about it," Sharp says.

Outside groups were curious as well, including the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association, which during an early October meeting in Minneapolis was planning to see the new Otto and its machines.

"Tech-Rec is going to be highlighted," Pfingsten says. "You can take that to the bank."

Body and Mind

Another first: The Tech-Rec machines will be an integral part of an existing class. Kalm, is overseeing the use of the machines for a two-credit general education course, Concepts of Fitness.



The Otto has long been one of the Human Performance department's main classrooms, a building in which eight sections of fitness activities are taught. Concepts of Fitness is being redesigned to include participation on the Tech-Rec machines. Concepts of Fitness is already a popular course in which students use aerobic and resistance equipment. Now, Kalm says, students will be required to spend some time on the techno-equipped fitness machines, tapping into classroom activity via the Desire To Learn (D2L) portal — an online learning tool used increasingly by faculty to complement classroom course delivery — through which they'll take in an audio or video lecture followed by a short quiz.

"We want to present it in a dynamic fashion," Kalm says. The class will be self-paced, with students logging in at least once a week. "They'll only be able to do it on equipment that's in the Otto Center," Kalm says. "The important thing is we're going to get them to the Center."

Kalm himself was a student at Minnesota State Mankato in the early 1970s, when he received his health education major and athletic training minor. He returned to Minnesota State Mankato in 1980, after acquiring a master's degree in exercise physiology and working at St. Cloud State as its first athletic training director. He finished his doctoral degree in exercise physiology and sports psychology. Today, the former student of Gordy Graham has been teaching athletic training and exercise science courses here for the past twenty-six years.

For much of that time, Otto had its small line of exercise machines before a bank of eight televisions connected by a cable. This occupied maybe half of one side of the Arena. But Kalm got to thinking about the setup he had at home — how his home computer had been wired to receive and display his television's signal. He talked with Pfingsten about bringing that TV/computer combo to the fitness machines, perhaps through surplus or older computers. They joined forces with Johnson and Sharp who decided, essentially, why shoot small.

"Mark and Wayne said, 'let's do it right.' New computers wired for Internet, television, DVDs, the works.

Plenty of other fitness centers have monitors, for everything from cardio monitoring to television. But this may well be the only system in the country with computer usage linked to an exercise machine. And the system allows room for expanding into other areas — chances are they'll provide campus related links such as campus goings-on.

"It'll be difficult for a person to write a paper on a treadmill, but it is doable on one of the stationary bikes," Kalm said. "I think we'll find students using it imaginatively."

Student (and "Wanted") Bodies

Sophomore Kelsey Preble was one of the first in line. On the morning of Oct. 17, however, she was too early. The machines were still being installed.

She tried again the following day and was soon pedaling away on a Tech-Rec machine — her mileage and resistance detailed in the digital LED readout. She wasn't watching too much of the readout, however. Preble was watching an installment of VH-1's 100 Most Wanted Bodies, a show featuring the chiseled bodies of pop musicians such as Eminem and Gwen Stefani.

"Before, I'd have to worry about missing my shows and now I can just watch them here," she said while pedaling. She had already checked e-mail at the machine.

Preble, nineteen, plays basketball on an intramural basketball team, and shooting baskets is often part of the workout she aims for each day. She likes to spend about three hours working out, and the first hour on the Tech-Rec bike, she says, felt like much less time, thanks to the entertainment.

"It makes it seem like a lot faster, like you're not actually working out," she says. "It helps you work out longer."

As she talked on a recent mid-afternoon, about fifteen other students were running or biking on the forty Tech-Recs positioned just behind the purple running track on the second floor of Otto. Despite the activity, it was though they moved in silence, given the size of the building and, likely, the newness of the machines. More

noisy were the basketballs slamming onto the glossy wooden floor of the gym below, which accommodates three basketball courts. Behind the windows of two gym walls, a few dozen students worked out in the L-shaped weight room. Further along the perimeter of the building, two students were homeworking in the student lounge, equipped with six cushioned chairs and a Sony flat-screen television.

Earlier, at the Homecoming day ceremony, Gordy Graham was among the hundred or so onlookers in the new center. And as he watched demonstrations of two Tech-Rec prototypes, it all made perfect sense to him.

"I've always said you could work harder on an exercise bike if you had a video screen in front of you that provided incentive to do more," Graham says. "It's a diversion for the exercise, and that's a good thing. You do more than you think you could." Graham retired from the University eleven years ago, but still lives in Mankato and considers the athletic facilities his home away from home, he says.

"But boy, how the home has changed."

Phases of History



In 1997, businessman, former state senator and alumnus Glen Taylor got the new ball rolling with a \$9.2 million donation toward construction of what is now Taylor Center, a sharply designed and compelling entry point to the University. Since its opening in October

2000, the building is where the Maverick basketball, volleyball and

wrestling teams host their opponents, and the Bresnan Arena within (named for Bill Bresnan, who contributed \$1 million to the project) seats nearly 5,000. It has been used for political rallies, guest speakers and rock concerts.

That phase of construction was followed by three more, starting with construction of the \$11 million Bud Myers Field House, which was completed in late 2001. The field house is used by athletics, campus recreation and human performance and contains a 200-meter, eight-lane indoor track. The next phase was remodeling of the Highland Center around the Otto Arena. The 2002 renovation added various offices for both Human Performance and Athletic Training administration, as well as a lounge, coaches' offices and other amenities. That project cost \$9 million. The next, and final, step was fixing the old Otto Arena.

"It's been a challenge taking an arena and making it a recreation facility," says Pfingsten. He met the challenge, he says, by doggedly pursuing funding and new ideas for equipment and programming for the facility. Routinely talking to contacts in student activities, he made a continuous case for providing students with a premiere recreation facility. It wasn't his idea necessarily, he says, it was theirs — as evidenced by late 1990s survey of students in which they said they wanted access to a quality recreation facility and weren't getting it.

Pfingsten inherited a facility that, in 1999, had few if any remarkable features for a recreation center — cardio machines in Otto Arena consisted of two treadmills, three stationary bikes and three "steppers." It had fifteen pieces of weight equipment.

Today, the Otto Recreation Center has forty Tech-Rec stations in addition to the weight room, pool, track and courts. But even before the drastic transformation, Pfingsten oversaw — and to a great deal engineered — a remarkable renewed interest in campus recreation. He has been credited with increasing student participation in Minnesota State Mankato's recreation programs and with getting more student fees allotted to the program.

In 1999, campus recreation was allotted \$70,000 in student fees. Through Pfingsten's persistent lobbying, campus rec today gets \$400,000 yearly in student fee support. And University

administration cites Pfingsten as the force behind a large increase in student participation rates in campus rec, which includes open recreation, intramural sports, fitness activities and sports clubs. Under Pfingsten's watch, student participation in campus rec has grown from 30 percent in 2002 to 60 percent.

(Davenport and Pfingsten both say they're aiming to bring that number to eighty percent which, Davenport told the Oct. 1 gathering, would be a new record among state universities.)

"Now it's my job to provide programming, equipment and services to maintain student levels," Pfingsten says.

Add to this already growing interest, the inviting nature of the new Otto Recreation Center as well as the novel addition of the Tech-Rec equipment, and Pfingsten said he's confident the University can achieve that 80 percent rate. All it takes may be one visit to the Center, he said.

"And they're going to come back," Pfingsten says. "And you know what the best advertiser is; it's word-of-mouth. They [students] are going to say 'You need to come to the rec center with me; it's really cool.'"

The new Otto will likely keep students from doing what they were doing in 1999 — going to other, more attractive facilities outside of the University. In 2005 students will have access to a dynamic facility with the Tech-Rec machines, track, weight room, pool and courts — all free with a Mav Card.

"The facilities are drawing them in," Pfingsten says, "Our programs will keep them coming."