



NEWSLETTERS



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# How Crossfit Became the New Power Lunch

Two-hour leisurely lunches are over. Today, sweat networking reigns as the power move for hard-charging entrepreneurs. [🔗](#)

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SEP 17, 2024

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Paul L. Gunn Jr. and Dave Chatterjee at Life Time Fitness in Johns Creek, Georgia. Photography by Andrew Thomas Lee

When Paul L. Gunn met Dave Chatterjee, his future business partner, in 2022, they weren't rubbing elbows at a conference or standing in line for drinks at a tech meet-up. The former neighbors reconnected at their local gym.

As the two started working out together at Life Time Fitness in the Atlanta suburb of Johns Creek, they talked of their families and pastimes. Work came up, too. Gunn, 45, is the founder and CEO of Kuog Corporation, a logistics company that contracts with the defense industry, while Chatterjee, 60, is a cybersecurity expert, as well as a professor, podcaster, and author. Eventually, as the conversations continued and other chance encounters were turned into deliberate meetings, work ceased being only a peripheral topic—so much so that when Gunn recently landed a nine-year, \$975 million contract from the Air

Force's Rapid Sustainment Office, he says, he began planning to bring in his gym buddy as a subcontractor to the deal.

Chatterjee's sweat networking skills paid off in other ways, too. But that's not the only business deal Chatterjee is juggling from contacts he made while working out. The professor ran into a former student at the gym who asked him to share his cybersecurity expertise with his insurance company, where he is a senior executive. Separately, a fellow player at Ultimate Tennis is talking to Chatterjee about joining a company board to share his cybersecurity expertise. And he credits a fitness instructor's regular check ins about his book writing to help him finish and publish *Cybersecurity Readiness: A Holistic and High Performance Approach* in 2021. Finding business leads through exercise has been so productive that it's become the primary way Chatterjee has been connecting with executives.

"Lately, I've been telling them, 'Look, instead of meeting at a club for lunch, how about we meet for a game of pickleball or tennis?'" says Chatterjee. "This way, we are engaging in a healthy activity and we are also having a discussion, as opposed to eating."

One of the biggest professional networking shifts out of Covid has been how much founders have pivoted away from languid lunches and dinners to meeting colleagues while they exercise. They're now finding one another on Strava – which they call LinkedIn for athletes." They're meeting at dawn to chat across ellipticals. They're building on their triathlon networks to generate work leads. And when other colleagues are watching screenings at the Sundance Film Festival, they're hitting the slopes with their most valued clients. And they're all in on pickleball.

"There's nothing like being in the trenches with someone athletically" to build trust, says Jeanne Meyer, 60, whose consulting business has been driven largely by the relationships she has made as a lifelong endurance athlete and triathlete. That trust-based relationship, if you're lucky, she adds, "can actually translate into a business relationship." She also finds some of the best professional networking at Sundance takes place on chairlifts. "You build that relationship and it kind of gets you to this person's hardcore."

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Sweat networking isn't new. Recall that racquetball has long been popular on Wall Street, and the golf course has served as the bucolic setting to many historic business deals. A thrown golf game – between Charles Schwab, then the chairman of Carnegie Steel, and Andrew Carnegie, the company's founder and namesake – famously led to the company's early 20th-century acquisition by U.S. Steel.

So it's not surprising that sports and fitness continue to loom large in business. But it's still relatively novel – particularly if you're *really* sweating. "I grew up hearing that business deals were done on the golf course. Business deals were done at a coffee shop. When you see movies and TV shows, you see people at a restaurant having dinner and suits," says Royce Carter, 50, the founder of the IT firm Vetoma. After meeting Gunn while the two were working out at a Crossfit, also in Johns Creek, he too is going to join Gunn's Air Force deal as a subcontractor. "It wasn't until I got older that I realized that business can be done in a T-shirt."

John Katzman, 64, has long been a fan of making T-shirt-clad handshakes. The founder of Princeton Review, 2U and Noodle says he has been meeting business associates for workouts for 30 years. But he noted that Covid intensified the



When Gunn (right) landed a nine-year, \$975 million contract from the Air Force he tapped Chatterjee as a subcontractor. Photography by Andrew Thomas Lee

urge. During that time, he said that meeting people for a walk or workout outside became the safer option. Now, in a business culture of continued Zoom meetings, he says that connecting with a business associate while exercising is one of the best ways to have a focused conversation. It's also the type of meeting he is most receptive to scheduling.

"You spend a lot of time in Zoom meetings utterly distracted by your email, texts coming in, kids, dogs, there are a million distractions. A

workout, it's just the two of us," said Katzman. "The easiest way to get on my calendar is over a workout because I need to put it in my day regardless and I hate working out alone."

But, he has rules. Katzman says he'll work out with only one person at a time; he doesn't schedule any workout meetings that require reviewing spreadsheets and he chooses exercises that don't require what he calls a major "cognitive load" like elliptical or cycling.

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Sweat networking enthusiasts also note that they learn a lot more about a person while sharing a workout out with them rather than a Cobb salad. That's what Sam Thompson, 50, discovered after Katzman agreed to work out with

him. The founding partner of Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Progress Ventures cycles an hour at least every day and does two to three 70- to 140-mile cycling events each year, so when Katzman suggested they go for a long-distance bike ride, Thompson was game.

Thompson, who didn't know Katzman before hitting the road, didn't just keep up. He challenged Katzman. "I am a fairly avid cyclist. So it was not hard for me to push a little bit, and I think that helped him appreciate and respect who I was," said Thompson. "If anything, I was pushing him a little bit harder."

Thompson notes that cycling with people gives him a glimpse of what they would be like as colleagues. "How one behaves on the road," he says, "how you handle traffic, how you follow road laws." He added that these details are far more helpful than "anything you could ever get from an experience at a bar or over a power lunch."

Working out together also seems to build loyalty, especially among founders who are eager to see other entrepreneurs succeed. Brad Burns, founder of St. Louis-based Burns Holdings, works out with two dozen business owners every weekday morning at the Missouri Athletic Club from 5 to 6:30 a.m. Burns, 45, said he typically runs for an hour on the treadmill and then lifts weights.

"You see each other, you talk. You interact," he said. "You sit in the sauna together."

Those workouts have helped Burns with more than staying fit. His workout friends introduced Burns to a major restaurant lead for his startup wholesale seafood business. His fellow workout buddies also check in with him every morning to see how they can help support his many contracting, pool, and investment businesses, particularly the seafood business he is currently

launching. Burns says that there are connections he would have never made without his workout group.

"It's a non-confrontational way to cultivate a relationship with somebody that if you were to approach them in a business setting, you may not be able to interact with them," said Burns.

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While fitness brands certainly have a window into the nuanced world of sweat networking, companies outside of that universe are starting to get wise to the trend.

Members-only or affinity clubs that may not have gyms are adding exercise networking into their growth plans. Blackbird, a loyalty and payments program launched by Ben Leventhal, a founder of Eater and Resy, which opened an exclusive breakfast club in March, next month expects to add a running club to its breakfast club pass. That's because so many breakfast club members were incorporating running into their breakfast meetups and connecting on Strava.

While HQ, an 18-month-old private membership club in Washington, D.C., focuses on events and dinners, it partnered with local health clubs, yoga studios, and a boxing gym to meet demand as well as host events with dancing.

And, yes, golf is also making a comeback. Richard Clay, a 24-year-old charter member of Burns's club, HQ, and co-founder and COO of Washington, D.C.-based luxury retail concept the Felix Experience, says he is trying to schedule some tee times with a mentor he calls "auntie" Melissa Bradley. She is a managing partner of 1863 Ventures, a D.C.-based venture fund. He has no plans to ask her for help with his startup, but he views playing golf with her as a way to build an enduring professional relationship.

"The sport lays the atmosphere," says Clay. "If we're out there, we can talk about anything under the sun. The business will come up eventually. For me, it's about playing long-term games with long-term people."

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