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Tigers keep on eye on Anytime Fitness | Former football players open a 24-hour gym
By Mary Leslie • DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

Former NFL players Gabe Northern and Kevin Franklin, co-owners of Anytime Fitness, wanted to open a gym where both members and staff would feel like family — and like a team.

The eyes of a tiger, the mascot for the Louisiana natives' alma mater of Louisiana State University, stare from the wall behind the front desk at the Apalachee Parkway fitness center, keeping watch over the activity inside.

Towering over the rest of the staff at 6-feet-3-inches, Northern was propped against the back counter on a recent afternoon, wearing a tight gray T-shirt that made the proof of his athleticism difficult to hide.

Northern, who was a defensive end for New York's Buffalo Bills and the Minnesota Vikings, and Franklin, who was a defensive back for the Oakland Raiders and Detroit Lions, played for rival high-school teams before attending LSU, where they became friends. Northern still holds the Independence Bowl record for the longest fumble return.

After years of playing professional ball, the two decided they wanted to open a place where people could exercise, play and socialize. After looking at the demographics of various cities, they picked Tallahassee as the place to base their operation, which is part of a national franchise.

The gym doesn't have a corporate franchise feel, however. "This is a fitness facility, but it's also a family," said Northern, who takes pride in the closeness between the staff and members.

The gym is open to its members 24 hours a day. Members are given a swipe card to get in, and — thanks to a series of cameras placed around the facility — Northern and Franklin can watch the gym from their laptop computers at home.

With a combined 30 or so years of experience with sports performance training between Northern and Franklin, they have adapted many of the concepts they learned to their own teachings.

"We're applying those same disciplines — such as strength training — to the everyday person," said Franklin.

Members receive more than swipe cards and encouragement at Anytime Fitness — everyone gets a nickname.

Wakulla County business owner Erin Stenbridge is called "Lohan" for her resemblance to pop star Lindsay Lohan. She has been coming since January, even though the gym isn't close to her home. On a recent afternoon she was lounging on one of the couches in the game room.

The game room has two large flat-screen televisions hooked up to Sony PlayStation and Nintendo Wii gaming systems, and there are magazines sprawled across the tables.

"I've been a member of several gyms before," she said, "but the camaraderie between Kevin and Gabe, and their energy, make it a lot of fun to work out here."

Northern and Franklin made an effort to give the gym a clean, upscale feel, installing a large wood floor, several flat-screen TVs along the walls and a recumbent bicycle with a video-game screen.

Marion Shaffer, who has trained with Northern, said she was impressed by his easy-going attitude when they first met, so much so that she asked him to be her personal trainer.

"He has a true desire to help other people get fit, and he is inspired by helping severely obese people get into shape," she said. "By far he is the nicest and most genuine man I have ever met."



Louisiana State alumnus and Anytime Fitness co-owner Gabe Northern played football with the Buffalo Bills and the Minnesota Vikings. (MIKE EWEN/Democrat)