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A \$40 fitness class? Yeah, that's a thing.



There is nothing like a skilled instructor, a heart-pumping routine and the exhilaration of completing a tough workout. But at \$40 a pop?

That's the going rate for a single session of the region's most expensive group fitness class, at Potomac Pilates. And the cost is not too far off from some other popular classes in the Washington area, where pricey studio workouts are starting to rival those in New York and Los Angeles.

In some ways, high-priced classes are a sign that the region's fitness market has matured. There are now an array of studios and gyms catering to diverse tastes and no shortage of people looking for innovative ways to burn calories. Still, \$40? How do you even come up with a number like that?

"We intentionally price our individual class high because we want to discourage single-use clients," said Reina Offutt Pratt, founder of Potomac Pilates. "We want the person who's going to make the commitment to come two to three times a week. That's how you see results."

Potomac Pilates has tried several pricing models over the years, including making the first class free. But only 20 percent of the people who received a free class returned, so Offutt Pratt switched the introductory offer to a month of unlimited classes for \$129.

“I found that if I can convince people to take three or four classes, I can turn them into long-term clients,” she said. “We now have a retention rate of closer to 60 percent.”

Offutt Pratt said most clients buy a membership for \$210 a month and come to class eight times a month, which works out to be a lot less than \$40.

For Anne Mahlum, founder of Solidcore, asking clients to pay \$37 for a drop-in class is a matter of economics.

A Solidcore workout consists of slow, controlled moves on machines called Megaformers, which Mahlum said, cost about \$7,000 apiece. Classes require nine to 13 of those apparatus, one for each client.

Locating her studios in some of the District’s most central ‘hoods — such as Shaw and Adams Morgan — doesn’t come cheap. Neither does employing 45 part-time coaches. Each of those trainers receives a base pay plus bonuses tied to class turnout. Six of those coaches also work full time running the company’s seven locations in the area.

All of those staffing, real estate and equipment costs factor into the class price, Mahlum said. She noted that classes at her two studios in Minneapolis, where operating costs are much lower than the Washington area, are \$4 cheaper.

“When you break down the economics and the quality, our classes are small, you get personalized team training that produces results you’re not going to get at a gym,” Mahlum said.

At Orangetheory Fitness, personnel costs are also a significant factor in the \$30 class price, said chief executive Dave Long. The company pays its trainers \$55 to \$100 per session, which is higher than the going rate at most gyms. Orangetheory, a national chain with four locations in the region, is known for circuit workouts on rowing machines, treadmills and strength training.

“The quality of the workout comes down to having an amazing fitness professional at the helm,” Long said. “So we invest a ton into recruiting, training and retaining great fitness trainers. It takes money to get the best.”

Washingtonians don’t seem deterred by studio prices. Even when Solidcore raised the class price from \$35 to \$37 in April, people still gushed online about why it was worth it.



Layla Rios, 31, has become a bit more strategic in her attendance. Rather than vie for a spot in the packed early-morning and evening Solidcore classes, she takes off-peak-hours sessions that are \$12 cheaper.

“I would never be able to afford the \$37. I’m a nurse, and that’s way more than I make an hour,” said Rios, who lives in Fairfax. “I’ll go at least twice a month because it’s a phenomenal class.”

Not too long ago, you’d have been hard-pressed to find a class in the area that cost more than \$20. That was bound to change once savvy club owners realized locals were willing to fork over a few more dollars for a class focused on their specific goals.

Specialty studios are now peppered throughout urban corridors in the District, Maryland and Virginia. They draw a range of health-conscious people who prefer tailored workouts in a boutique setting rather than a big-box gym, or who simply like trying the latest popular routine.

“Boutique studios are able to charge a higher price per class because they are meeting a need among a certain demographic,” said Meredith Poppler of the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association. “The higher rates are part of the appeal and trendiness.”

But multiple classes at a studio can easily cost upward of \$200 a month, surpassing most gym memberships in the area. To keep costs down, locals are turning to services such as ClassPass, which lets users pay \$99 a month for an unlimited number of classes at any of its network of 200 studios. Washingtonians have made more than 200,000 class reservations since the company launched in the region in October.

Here’s the thing: You can’t go to the same studio more than three times a month. And some of the most sought-after studios — including Solidcore and SoulCycle — are not members.

Nishtha Ghosh, 25, has taken a class at SoulCycle, the cycling chain that started in New York. Still, she primarily works out in the gym in her Chinatown apartment building, treating the cycling class as a reward.

“It’s a good workout, but not something I can afford to keep up,” Ghosh said. “It’s more like a special treat. Instead of doing happy hour with my friends, we’ll do SoulCycle. It’s basically the amount we’d pay for a few drinks and appetizers. And there’s no hangover at the end.”