



Youth athletic facilities in demand in growing northern St. Johns

By Colleen Jones
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When WGV Gymnastics opens its doors this summer in a new, expanded space, it will be the third time the business has had to upsize in seven years.

Heather Newton, accountant-turned-business owner, launched the facility with help from her mother in 2011 to teach recreational gymnasts as well as prepare athletes for the competitive and collegiate levels of the sport.

WGV Gymnastics now serves 550 students from preschool to high school, offering classes during the day, after school and evenings. There's a travel team, summer camp and a mommy-and-me program. That's in addition to other uses the space is rented out for, such as birthday parties and sports tournaments.

Next door, Newton's grandfather runs an indoor baseball facility, also under the WGV name.

Driving demand for all things youth sports is growth in northern St. Johns County where families — many of them affluent, well-educated and health conscious — are moving into newly built luxury communities at a dizzying pace.

"This area has so many kids to go around, we [those in youth sports] are not fighting for business," Newton said. "In fact, we're busting out of our seams."

About one-quarter of a mile away from the current site, the new facility will encompass 14,500 square feet, allowing WGV to expand its offerings and transport children from area schools on weekday afternoons.

Newton and others in the business say there is an increasing need for reliable, year-round facilities where amateur athletes and youth sporting leagues can practice and play.

"There is especially a need in northern St. Johns — and yes, we do also pull from Duval and beyond — it's part of our plan to expand to have other sites across the area as well," said Jay

Glating, a commercial real estate developer for Above Athletics, a 30,000-square-foot multi-use athletic facility that opened last September on Phillips Highway near the St. Johns and Duval border. “You can’t always count on the YMCAs and schools who are always changing schedules to have year-round programming.”

Glating said the complex was built with growth in mind.

Currently, Above’s first phase houses Jacksonville Basketball Academy, First Coast Gymnastics, Five Tool Training, a girls travel softball program and MaxFit, a cross-fit style fitness center.

Those tenants can decide to rent out the air-conditioned space to teams and programs that need it seasonally, such as volleyball and cheerleading teams, when they are not using it. There is also an 18,000-square-foot covered “airnasium” turf space.

Above Athletics is just about to break ground on its second phase which will add another three stories and 26,000 square feet to the structure. The complex will include more recreational offerings — possibly a dance and acrobatic studio as well as a martial arts program — as well as professionals in the health and wellness industry, such as Rainbow Pediatrics which will offer standard care as well as sports injury prevention and treatment.

“The goal is to have more than one type of business there, so parents can drop one or two kids and do other things, avoiding those multiple trips back and forth,” Glating said.

Glating said he hopes to bring the same prototype to other communities across Northeast Florida in the next several years, specifically targeting World Golf Village, Clay County and the north Jacksonville/Fernandina Beach area.

An even more ambitious athletics complex could be on the horizon for the area as well.

The so-called “Project Family” project — a 175,000-square-foot youth sports facility off Race Track Road and 9B in St. Johns County — is still working its way through the permitting process. St. Johns Development Partners is planning a space that would include indoor turf fields, courts, a professional-length track, gymnastics space, batting cages and pitching tunnels.

When Newton began WGV Gymnastics seven years ago, they were the only indoor, private gym for miles around, she said.

To her way of thinking, the demand for more and different offerings for youth athletics in northern St. Johns County will only increase as the rate of residential growth continues.

“In an area like this,” Newton said, “families want to see their kids well-balanced and to keep them busy, and sports is how you keep your kids out of trouble and having fun.”