



# Expert Tips for Athlete Retention

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# Our Goal? To Help You Retain Athletes



At Zen Planner and SugarWOD, **we talk to thousands of gym owners every year**. When we ask what keeps them up at night, they always say the same thing — athlete retention.

Retention is an issue for all gyms across the board. Even if a gym is adding new athletes to their community and building relationships, retaining existing athletes is still a top priority.

One of the main reasons athlete retention is so important is that **it costs more to win a new athlete** than it does to keep a current one. So letting your attrition get out of hand is financially bad for your business, regardless of how many new athletes you add.

Plus, athletes are more valuable the longer they stay at your gym. They refer family and friends and add value to your community.



## Retention takes work.

There are some simple things you can do to build a culture of retention and keep your existing athletes happy.

Many of the ideas we share in this guide come from industry leaders and the most successful gym owners we know. We also back these ideas up with research from top retention experts.

Let's get started!



# Retention Strategies



You know those businesses that provide such an amazing experience you never think to check out their competitors?

Our retention strategies will help you provide that kind of experience. Whether these strategies serve as a reminder or a source of new ideas for you, we advise adopting them to keep your athletes happy and coming back.

Offer Great  
Programming  
& Convenient  
Classes

STRATEGY #1

Show  
Appreciation for  
Your Athletes

STRATEGY #2

Make It Easy To  
Be a Member

STRATEGY #3

Engage Your  
Athletes

STRATEGY #4

Build a Strong  
& Inclusive  
Community

STRATEGY #5

Start Them  
Off on the  
Right Foot

STRATEGY #6

Know Your  
Numbers

STRATEGY #7

## STRATEGY #1

# Offer Great Programming & Convenient Classes

Your athletes will be more likely to come back if they get:

- **THE PROGRAMMING THEY WANT**
- **CONVENIENT CLASS TIMES**

If your class times and location aren't convenient, your athletes will be forced to consider other options. Likewise, if your programming isn't comprehensive and well thought out, you'll also lose athletes.

## Evaluate Your Programming, Hours & Offerings

From time to time, evaluate your classes and assess the ability of your athletes to get in and train. Make sure your coaches know the importance of meeting your athletes' needs first.

Take the time to create quality programming — this is a priority for your members, especially when it comes to class schedules and programming.

When you or your coaches feel uninspired or short on time, your athletes will be able to tell. Any shortcuts you take will be reflected in lackluster reactions to the WODs or less-than-optimal athletic performance.

### PRO TIP!



Don't have enough time to spend on programming? The SugarWOD Marketplace gives owners and coaches access to thousands of supplemental WODs from competitive athletes and esteemed coaches in functional fitness and related areas.



## Survey Your Athletes

Get candid insights from your athletes by conducting biannual satisfaction surveys.

You can use free and easy tools like SurveyMonkey or SoGoSurvey to send questions by email. Or automatically send a survey email through a gym management software like Zen Planner to make this process simpler.

Another option? Print out paper surveys and leave them by your check-in desk alongside a collection box and some pens. (Remember: It's a good idea in general to solicit suggestions from your athletes with an anonymous feedback box).

### PRO TIP!



Offer a small reward or hold a raffle to incentivize members to complete your survey. The prize could be a free class or program, free merchandise, or a special discount on their membership.

The goal is to get as many survey responses as possible so you can improve your offerings and boost athlete retention, so full participation is ideal.



## STRATEGY #2

# Show Appreciation for Your Athletes

You are in the service industry.

Just like other service providers, your athletes judge your value based on how you make them feel. Gyms that do a great job of making their athletes happy have higher retention rates than those that don't.

## Let Your Athletes Know They Matter

The easiest way to make your athletes feel special is to slow down and really listen when they talk to you.

We are drawn to people who are interested in us and make us feel important. Showing genuine interest in your athletes improves retention because it makes them feel valued by you and your community.

## Try This Empathy Exercise

The next time you're actively listening to an athlete, challenge yourself to remember at least 1 fact from the conversation. The next time you speak, ask them about that fact.

→ **ATHLETE FACT:** They're training for a competition.

→ **YOUR RESPONSE:** Ask them about their progress leading up to the event. Later, follow up by asking how they performed. To go the extra mile, you could even encourage other gym members to support them at the event.

→ **ATHLETE FACT:** They're trying a new nutrition program or supplement.

→ **YOUR RESPONSE:** Ask them how they like it so far and how you can help support them. This could be a great opportunity to offer a free sample of a complementary supplement or a discount on nutrition classes, if you offer that at your gym.

When you care enough to ask about their lives outside the gym, your athletes will feel connected and valued.



## Hype Your Athletes Up

There are many other ways to make your athletes feel special, too. Celebrate accomplishments and personal events, like:

- Birthdays
- Baby births
- Gym anniversaries
- Personal records

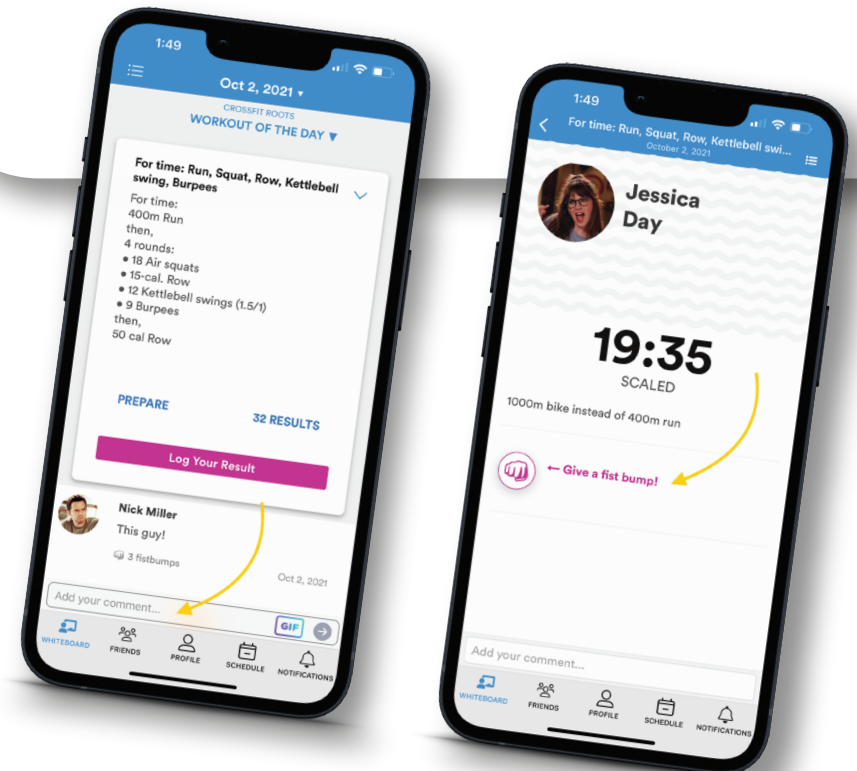
If you can find a reason to celebrate, do it. Something as simple as short congratulations in a newsletter, an automated email, a post on social media, or an announcement before class is enough to make people feel appreciated.

Expert Tips for Athlete Retention

### PRO TIP!



Remember to engage online, too. Comment on an athlete's PR in the SugarWOD app to get them really pumped up. Give them fist bumps to maintain that celebratory community atmosphere.





## Lean on Coaches as Community Builders

Depending on how you've set up your business, coaches can connect with athletes in a way that you can't as a gym owner. Leverage those athlete-coach relationships when you're trying to improve retention.

Our favorite relationship builder? Leave a basket of stamped, branded note cards at your check-in desk. Ask your coaches to send a card to athletes whenever they can find a fun reason.

Members who get handwritten notes in the mail from your coaches will be happy to know they are cared about. Going out of your way like this will keep you head and shoulders above your competitors.

## Motivate Your Team to Give Exceptional Service

It's easy to forget just how valuable each and every athlete is, especially when stress is high. To combat that, bring the member experience up in team meetings and continually reward staff who deliver great customer service.

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## PRO TIP!



Regularly check in on your more established members. Many have hit the time when the sparkle of joining a gym has worn off. The PRs come less frequently, skills are harder to master, and everything gets a little too routine.

Meet these members for coffee, help them set new goals, and assist with skills they are struggling with. This will help keep their passion for fitness alive.

## Try These 3 Training Tips

- ❑ Share your athlete acquisition cost and athlete lifetime value with your team so they can see the importance of retaining athletes. (Jump to Section #7 for additional metrics).
- ❑ Incentivize great customer service by working retention metrics into your coaches' pay or team bonuses. By doing that, you'll make retention a priority for the whole team. And when your team values athlete retention, they'll look for ways to improve it.
- ❑ Identify common warning signs before athletes leave. Take advantage of your team's insight by spending a few minutes of each team meeting talking about athletes who might be in danger of leaving. Your coaches normally know there are concerns long before you do, simply because they work most closely with your athletes.

## STRATEGY #3

# Make It Easy to Be a Gym Member

Athletes don't want to deal with confusing processes or track you down to pay their membership fees. They're in your gym to train and focus on their own health. If you make it difficult to be a gym member, you'll lose out on loyal athletes.

## Audit Your Processes

As your gym grows and new employees join your team, processes can become complex or inefficient.

To keep things simple for your athletes, take the time to do occasional audits. Visit your website and walk through your in-gym athlete experience. Make sure it's easy to see the updated class schedule and check into class.

You can also sell basic retail items, like water, recovery drinks, snacks, wrist wraps, and jump ropes as an added convenience for your athletes. When you do this, you become their resource for all things fitness.

## Automate Billing & Payments

You want membership payments to be effortless — after all, that's how you make your money as an owner.

Automatic billing saves time and energy for you and your athletes. It also helps with retention because it takes the monthly payment decision point away from them. Otherwise, each month when it's time to pay, your athletes have to choose to renew.

Can you imagine manually opting into your streaming or phone service each month? After enough asks, you might consider dropping or switching your service. Plus, it's plain old inefficient!

### PRO TIP!



Choose a gym management software with automatic billing and integrated payment processing built right in, like Zen Planner.

Want to make payments even easier for you as an owner? Opt into a service like Full-Service Billing powered by Gains to recapture lost revenue and update declined payment methods.



## STRATEGY #4

# Engage Your Athletes

When training is routine, boring, and purposeless, people lose interest in it. Once that happens, you've lost them as an athlete.

But if training is fun and athletes are making even the smallest progress toward a goal, it's a lot easier to keep them engaged. It's also easier to show them why they should renew their membership.

## Keep It Fresh & Interesting

One important element of motivation is variety, so find ways to mix things up and make it fun to be an athlete at your gym.

Of course, as you make changes, stay true to your values. We're not suggesting you bring Zumba classes into your gym if you don't want to. Instead, we recommend adding offerings that make the most sense for you and your team. Your athletes will love the variety.



01

**Plan fitness challenges** that focus on developing healthy lifestyles, hitting personal goals, and incorporating well-rounded nutrition into your athletes' diets.

02

**Host workshops** to help your athletes work on their weaknesses, such as pull-ups, double unders, snatches, and muscle-ups.

03

**Hold outdoor classes** when the weather is nice, and add boot camps or community WODs to your schedule.

04

**Consider adding new classes** like weightlifting and yoga to round out your class schedule.

05

**Incorporate new fitness trends** into your existing programming.

06

**Purchase new equipment** like air bikes or sleds to offer your athletes more training options.



## Set Goals & Track Progress

When you track an athlete's progress, it shows you care about their success. It also keeps your athletes excited about training.

Meet with each athlete and review their WOD results and goals on a monthly basis. Also, make sure your goal-setting and achievement system is continuous. Don't let your athletes set a goal, achieve it, and then lose interest in working out.

### PRO TIP!



Workout tracking that's integrated into your athlete management software is a must for retention. Fun and engaging mobile apps like SugarWOD make it easy for athletes to check the daily WOD, log their results, and view historical data displaying their progress.

## STRATEGY #5

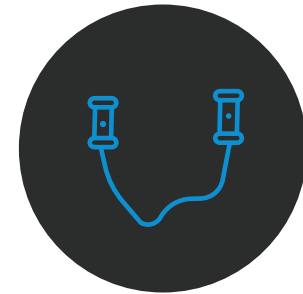
# Build a Strong & Inclusive Community

Most of your athletes rely on texting and mobile apps to communicate, so they'll expect your gym to provide that level of instantaneous connection.

Luckily, functional fitness and high intensity training gyms are some of the best places to get fit because of the supportive, family-like community. To take advantage of this valuable quality, build a membership base that makes your athletes feel accountable and supportive of one another.

## Plant the Seeds

Plan fun events to give your athletes a chance to get to know each other better. If you plant the seeds, your more social athletes will step up and help with planning future member-led events. Some popular get-togethers are:



- Mud runs
- Local competitions
- Happy hours
- Charity WODs
- Volunteer projects
- Group trips to Regionals or the Games

You can also keep it simple and invite your athletes to eat at a local restaurant after your weekly community WOD. Your athletes will enjoy spending time together no matter what they're doing.

### PRO TIP!



Try to schedule an event every month, and don't be discouraged if the turnout isn't great at first. Interest will grow as your community grows. Remember that these community-building events are worth their time and effort in the long run.





## PRO TIP!



Your gym's online hangout space is just as important as the physical one. To foster a culture of accountability and support, encourage your athletes to engage with each other through fist bumps and comments in the SugarWOD app.

## Create an Athlete Hangout Area

As your community builds, your athletes will come in earlier and linger longer to chat with their friends. If possible, give them a place to hang out and connect.

It doesn't need to be a big or fancy area. A couch or a table and a few chairs will work nicely. You're trying to give your athletes a place to bump into each other and talk about their WODs. This area is also where they can hold each other accountable for attendance and progress, so giving up space and making the expenditure is well worth it.

## Use Social Media to Reinforce Community

We normally talk about social media in regard to lead generation, but it's also a great tool for reinforcing the connections in your community. Consider delegating social media efforts to a team member to keep that part of your business thriving.



## Facebook

Consider creating a private Facebook group and inviting each of your members as they join your gym. Your members can use the private group to:

- Discuss WODs
- Congratulate other athletes on PRs and first-time movements
- Share healthy recipes
- Talk about things happening in the local fitness community

Coaches can use the group to post information like competition updates, nutrition tips, and inspiring articles and videos to keep your athletes excited about training.

You can also use Facebook to create official event pages that prompt each athlete to RSVP. With their permission, this is a great place to post images of your athletes participating in various WODs.



## Instagram

Instagram is many people's favorite social media platform. It's also one of the first places people go to scope out a business they're thinking about visiting or buying from.

You can show up on members' and locals' feeds in an organic way by posting regularly from a business account. This platform is especially great for answering quick questions and generating hype in the comments.

Try Instagram if you want a place to:

- Advertise upcoming programs, boot camps, or events
- Announce new retail products
- Highlight members or staff
- Post videos on proper form
- Host Instagram Lives where you can answer questions
- Show off new equipment or gym renovations



## TikTok

TikTok has taken over as the app that's always on in the background.

It may not be the first platform your members think to check, but if your gym has a fun vibe or caters to younger people, it may be worth spending some time building a presence there.

There are many routes you can take:

- Hopping on the sound trends
- Posting daily clips from your gym
- Creating educational fitness content
- Talking about life as a coach or owner
- Trying to get an original audio clip to go viral

Try to demonstrate your expertise with a sense of humor. The goofier (or more helpful) you get, the more you'll get your members talking and sharing.

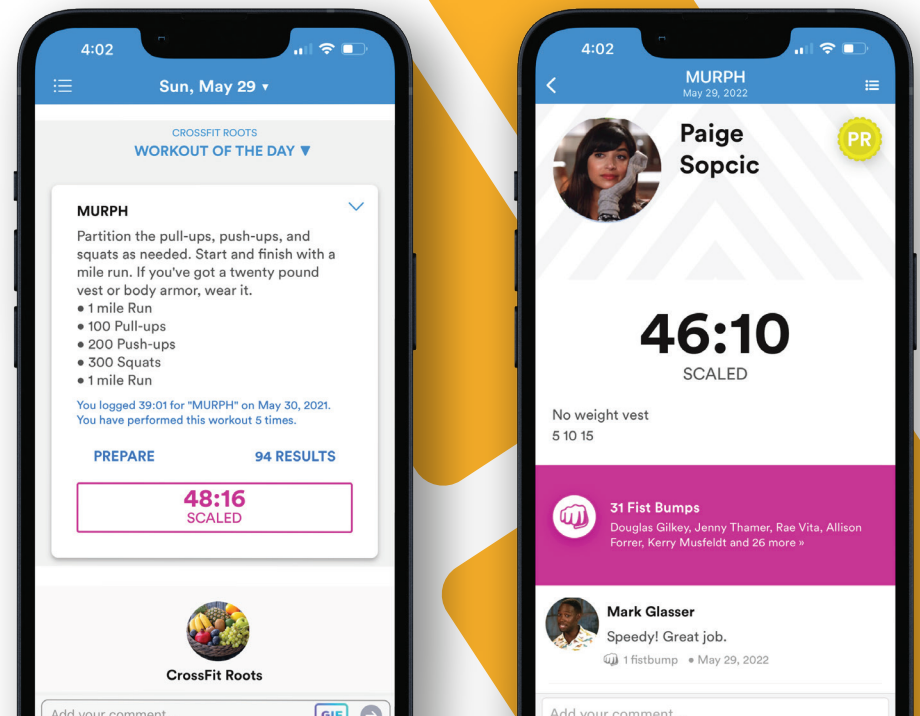
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## Other Tools

Some WOD-tracking tools like SugarWOD allow users to comment and like their fellow athletes' results.

Although this isn't a traditional form of social media, it's far more powerful as a motivational community-building tool. WOD trackers with social functionality reinforce the spirit of competition and community.





## STRATEGY #6

# Start Them off on the Right Foot

As with so many things in life, a good start at your gym matters. If first impressions are bad, or a new athlete is too intimidated to jump into your program, the chances are high that you'll lose them.

## Think About First Impressions

Athlete retention starts with someone's first visit, not when they show the warning signs of leaving.

Making a great first impression is critical because first impressions set the stage for everything that follows. If a first impression is good, athletes will be less likely to be angry if something goes wrong later. But if an athlete gets off to a bumpy start, they will see issues in a less favorable light.

For example, if a prospect comes into your gym and they have to wait a long time to be greeted, they will question your customer service. They might even think you don't value new athletes. Then, when the restroom is out of hand soap and you cancel a class because the coach is sick, chances are they'll be frustrated and move on to the gym down the road.

Instead, if you provide a great first impression and it's clear you value athletes, the soap and canceled class are less likely to trigger a negative response.

## Prioritize the Onramp Process

Entering a gym for the first time can be an intimidating experience. As you walk in, you hear the music blaring, barbells and plates slamming to the ground, and someone loudly grunting as they swing a kettlebell.

For a person who's never been exposed to this type of training, it can be intimidating. If you and your team are sensitive to new athlete nervousness, you can help them overcome this fear and become happy long-term members. A strong foundations program is also critical so the new athletes can transition safely and easily.

Don't be tempted to shortcut the onramp process to make eager new athletes happy, as this often causes injury and member churn.



## Help Them Form the Habit of Exercise

Often, you can help a new athlete form the positive habit of working out regularly by giving them the extra attention we talked about earlier.

When a new athlete leaves your gym, ask them when they'll be back. They'll be far more likely to show up for the next class if they give you a verbal affirmative.

If they leave with just a vague "see you later," it's easier for them not to come back, or at least not right away. Make sure you get that verbal commitment before they leave your gym.

### PRO TIP!



In today's world, many first impressions are online. Make sure your website is modern, responsive, secure, and built to drive leads.

Another feature to consider? An embeddable class calendar. With a software like Zen Planner, you can customize your calendar with your gym's logo and brand colors for a more cohesive, professional online experience.



## STRATEGY #7

# Know Your Numbers

Your business metrics tell you a lot about your athletes' happiness and your overall rate of retention.

Metrics analysis identifies trends, highlights trouble, and lets you intelligently address issues as they arise. Besides, you can't manage what you can't measure. Knowing and using your retention metrics to make decisions is a critical part of retaining your athletes.

## Bookmark These Metrics

Let's cover some definitions so you can effectively use metrics for retention management:

### MEMBERS INITIAL (MI)

The number of members at the beginning of any period.

### MEMBERS END (ME)

The number of members at the end of a period.

### GROSS NEW MEMBERS (GNM)

The total of all new members for a specific period, regardless of losses over the same period.

### GROSS MEMBERS LOST (GML)

The total of all member losses for a specific period, regardless of gains over the same period.



## PRO TIP!



Member management software is invaluable when it comes to WOD tracking, attendance tracking, and metric reporting.

Zen Planner has put time and effort into developing customizable, in-depth reporting for this very reason. You need to be able to pull accurate reports in order to understand which direction to steer your business.





## Calculate the Results

Now that you understand some of the basic member variables, you can start doing calculations and analysis.

### NET NEW MEMBERS (NNM)

$$\text{NNM} = \text{GNM} - \text{GML}$$

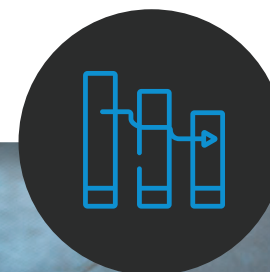
The difference between members gained and members lost for a specific period. A positive number indicates your business is growing and you can expect increasing revenue.

### CHURN OR ATTRITION RATE (CR)

$$\text{CR} = (\text{GML}/\text{MI}) \times 100$$

Churn rate represents the rate of member turnover.

To calculate your member churn rate, select a specific period, and divide your gross members lost during the period by the number of members at the beginning of the period. Then multiply by 100 for your percentage.



## ANNUALIZED CHURN (AC)

$$AC = (GML / ((MI + ME) / 2) \times 12) \times 100$$

Monthly churn rate expressed annually.

If your churn rate isn't where you want it to be, we suggest methodically implementing the suggestions in this guide.

## MEMBER RETENTION RATE (R)

$$R = ((ME - GNM) / MI) \times 100$$

The percentage of your members who continued their monthly membership.

Unlike churn rate, you want a high member retention rate. (Both calculations tell the same story but look at it from a different angle.) High retention is an indicator that your gym is performing well and your members are happy with your services.



## COST OF ACQUISITION (CAC)

$$\text{CAC} = \text{Total Marketing Costs} / \text{GNM}$$

The cost to gain 1 new member. To calculate your cost of acquisition, select a specific period and divide the total marketing/advertising costs by the total new members gained over the same period.

As we mentioned earlier, it costs more to replace an athlete than it does to keep one.

## ATTENDANCE PER ATHLETE

This is simply an evaluation of the number of classes or visits your athlete has per period of time. Weekly is standard, but analyzing attendance per athlete over time allows you to establish your own unique standard.

For example, you may consistently see a high rate of 3 or more classes per athlete per week. If that number falls to 2 for several consecutive weeks, you'll want to figure out why.



# Now, Go Make Your Members Happy!



Retention is the key to unlocking your success as a gym owner. It's a delicate balance to keep existing athletes while bringing in new ones, but we know you can do it.

By being proactive and building a culture of retention, you can make sure your athletes are happy and getting what they need. And by knowing your retention metrics, you can continuously monitor overall retention trends and address any issues if they arise.

Want even more help with athlete retention? We have 2 software tools that can make life easier for you.





# Zen Planner x SugarWOD Integration

To recap, there are 2 components to athlete retention:

- YOU AND YOUR COACHES HAVING THE DATA YOU NEED
- YOUR ATHLETES HAVING A POSITIVE MEMBER EXPERIENCE

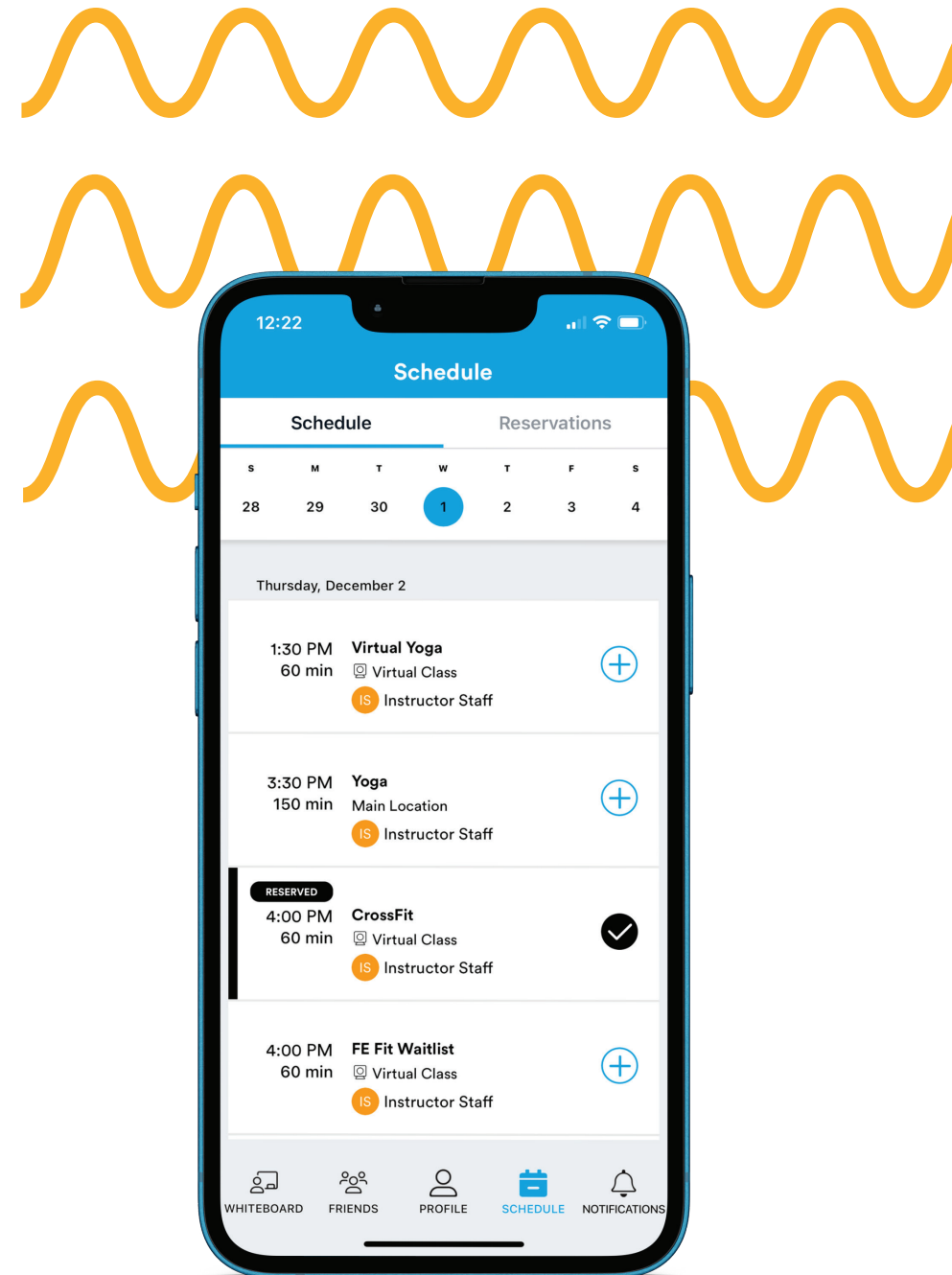
Our 2 sister solutions — Zen Planner and SugarWOD — help you accomplish both.

## How Does It Work?

**ZEN PLANNER** is your day-to-day member management and billing software. Think data reports, integrated payment processing, automatic billing, skills tracking, attendance tracking, retail, basic email automations, and more.

**SUGARWOD** is your community-building solution. It's part programming software, part partner marketplace, part workout tracking app for your athletes.

When these 2 tools are paired together, they become an unstoppable force for athlete retention.



## Why Activate the Integration?

You, your staff, and your members all get better features when you combine Zen Planner and SugarWOD. From the athlete side, your members only have to go to 1 app, the SugarWOD app, for:

- The class calendar
- Announcements
- Daily workouts
- Workout history
- Reservations, cancellations, waitlists, and check-ins
- Interaction with athletes and coaches
- Comments, likes, and fist bumps
- Leaderboards

That's everything an athlete could want, all in 1 place! And from your side, everything is streamlined:

- Member data is synced
- New Zen Planner members get automatically invited
- Inactive Zen Planner members get removed from your SugarWOD gym (but keep their historical data)
- The class parameters you set in Zen Planner affect what your members see in the SugarWOD app
- You get more supplemental programming options in the SugarWOD Marketplace

Sound good? Ready to see what the integration can do for your gym?

[Hop on a Call with Us](#)







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