

**W**ORKOUTS OFTEN HAVE BRIEF stints in the limelight—Google fitness fads from the 1990s and see how many names you recognize. Yet 26 years after its founding, Barry’s stands as “the biggest thing in fitness,” according to a 2024 *Los Angeles Times* story. What started as a single studio in West Hollywood went on to help kickstart the boutique fitness industry, which is projected to be an \$80 billion market before the end of the decade.

Barry’s staying power is remarkable not only because it defies the faddish nature of fitness but also because it continues to do so while dozens of competitors offer variations of the high-intensity group workouts Barry’s pioneered. Today, there are fitness boutiques dedicated to cycling, boxing, martial arts, weight-lifting, ballet, and more. Yet Barry’s workouts “under the red lights” remain as popular as ever—50 sweat-drenched minutes in a nightclub-esque red-lit room, wherein participants typically alternate high-intensity runs on a treadmill with weight-lifting intervals, set to a booming soundtrack.

Founder Barry Jay having retired, Barry’s is led by two co-CEOs: Joey Gonzalez, who joined as an instructor in 2004 and became CEO 11 years later (and who still teaches classes regularly); and Jonathan (JJ) Gantt, who joined in 2018 as the company’s CFO and became co-CEO earlier this year.

Together, the pair spoke via Zoom with Brunswick Partners Eleanor French and Lauren Nadig, both of whom came to the conversation slightly sore from recent Barry’s workouts.

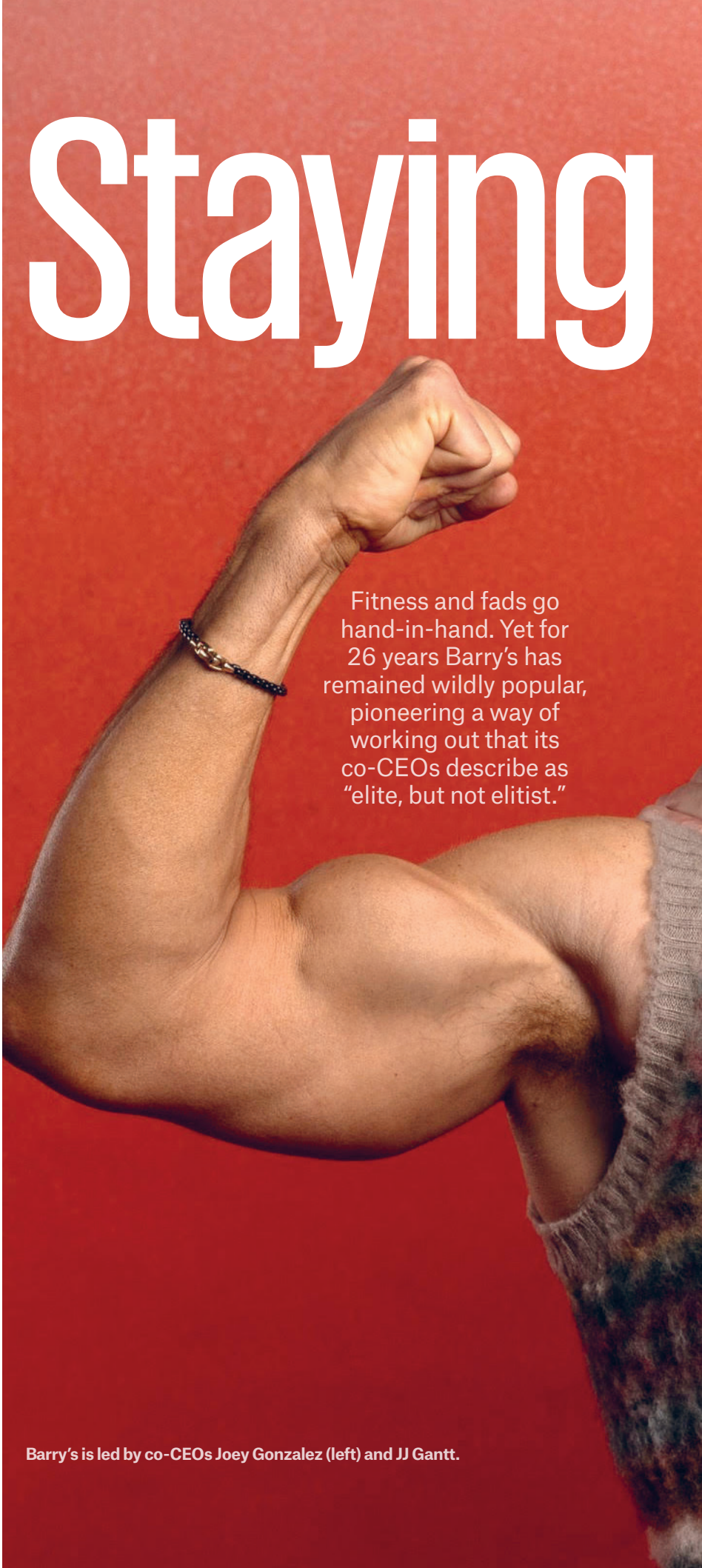
#### **Would I need to be in great shape to join Barry’s?**

**JOEY GONZALEZ:** Absolutely not. It’s a place for everyone. A lot of people come with some preconceived notions about what to expect. I empathize with that; it took me two years to gain the courage to take my first Barry’s class.

#### **How did “Barry’s Bootcamp” become Barry’s?**

**JG:** About a decade ago we recognized that if we wanted to realize our ambitions for growth and transforming lives worldwide, we needed to overcome this perception that we were only for elite athletes or celebrities—that we’d become this aspirational, exclusive, intimidating place. We did a total rebrand. We dropped the “bootcamp” in our name, dropped the dog tags logo, even changed the words our instructors used.

# Staying



Fitness and fads go hand-in-hand. Yet for 26 years Barry’s has remained wildly popular, pioneering a way of working out that its co-CEOs describe as “elite, but not elitist.”

Barry’s is led by co-CEOs Joey Gonzalez (left) and JJ Gantt.



**POWER**

There's this challenge—how do you create classes that make people who have been doing this for five, 10 years want to come back, while at the same time creating classes that are welcoming for those who are just starting? As a trainer, for instance, the best way to do that is to create programming that is difficult and challenging, but all the while voicing over how to modify and how to meet people where they are. Over and over in class when I'm teaching I'll say: "I'm just glad you're here, do the best you can."

**JJ GANTT:** That illustrates something both Joey and I really believe in, which is we are elite, not elitist. There's a big, big difference between the two. We want to be an elite workout: an experience that challenges you, maybe pushes your limits. But in no way do we want to make anyone feel like they don't belong here. Regardless of where you are on your fitness journey, you are welcome at Barry's.

#### **Fitness is prone to fads. What's been the secret to Barry's longevity?**

**JJ:** One is definitely the efficacy of the workout. We know what we do works, because we stick to the basics. We are the original high intensity and interval training concept. It's a combination of both cardio and strength training, and the efficacy of that approach is proven. We surround that workout with the experience—the lights, mirrors, DJ sound system, arguably the best-trained instructors in the industry. It's meant to be a lot of fun—a party under the red lights.

#### **How do you find, train, and retain talent? And how do you make sure that if an instructor leaves, your members don't?**

**JG:** Barry's was founded and has been led by an instructor for its entire 26 years. It's an instructor-centric business. We develop them. We invest in them. We started a "wow initiative," for example, about two years ago to help train our instructors to more consistently deliver a "wow class"—because it's not easy to teach floor and treadmill at the same time and hit beat drops and keep your playlists fresh.

One of the ways we retain is obviously in our compensation model. We're one of the most generous companies in boutique fitness. But in addition to that, Barry's really is a platform where instructors can help build something; you often see instructors grow through their life cycle and move from boutique to boutique until they get to Barry's.

One of the things we do differently is our instructors, as you've noticed, are not on a stage. There's



**Barry's high-intensity workouts are "a party under the red lights," says co-CEO JJ Gantt.**

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no lighting that follows us through the room. We're actually encouraged to become the background of your experience. We want our clients to feel like it is you versus you. Every class you take, what do you see in front of you? A mirror. You are literally staring at yourself. We want this time in the red room to really be enriching, reflective. That's part of the reason, I think, why people typically don't leave Barry's if an instructor does.

**JJ:** I think many of your readers could relate to this notion: We are in the people business, and scaling a people business is incredibly challenging. And I think Joey has been immensely successful at scaling culture and people. That's why I was excited to join his team six and a half years ago. We make intentional decisions on how we build that culture. All of our global partners send their founding instructors to the US for a two-week training program split between New York and LA. They're immersed not only in the training and how to deliver a Barry's class, but they find out who we are, how we live, and our values. They can then bring those cultural pieces back to Copenhagen or Berlin or Barcelona.

#### **The pandemic was brutal for fitness companies. How did you survive, and what have you learned from that experience?**

**JJ:** The first lesson was the importance of the relationships with our clients. When the pandemic hit,

our global studios went dark. Joey hosted a free online class from our closed West Hollywood studio. The production value was not great—he just shot it on an iPhone and streamed it on Instagram. But what Joey realized is that at that point the digital quality didn't matter; what mattered is we remain connected. If you can remember, we were in our homes, we didn't know how this was going to play out, how we were going to face this disease that didn't have a cure—and Joey hosted this powerful class where he was vulnerable and honest, saying, “We're going to be there for you, we're going to get through this together.”

We saw the power of that kind of connection, and pivoted quickly into a digital product: Barry's X. Initially it was just live streaming classes from our instructor's homes, but today it's become the best digital workout in the world with a library of incredible video-on-demand content.

**Not many businesses are led by co-CEOs. Why did you decide to go that route?**

**JG:** For the last three to four years, I would say JJ and I have effectively been co-CEOs: we would have two-on-one meetings with our leadership team. He and I could not be more opposite in many ways, and I don't think this setup would work for everyone, but the fact that we have been able to work for so many years has allowed us to build a lot of trust. I felt being co-CEOs was much more honest and reflective of what our relationship was.

**JJ:** I'm honored to serve in this role with Joey. And as Joey mentioned, we're wired differently. And I would say for anyone that's evaluating this as a potential structure, find someone who complements you. Every leader has their relative strengths and weaknesses, and I think Joey and I complement each other so well in this partnership because we bring very different skill sets to the office—which helps given CEOs today face almost an unrealistic expectation of what you're supposed to be an expert in. We lean into the functions that match our experience and expertise more.

I'd say there's three characteristics of why it works: an immense level of mutual respect, high levels of humility, and great communication.

**What comes next for Barry's?**

**JJ:** We're going to expand our global footprint. Barry's Athens is coming. We're going to continue to open studios here in the US including in Hoboken, New Jersey, in Charleston, South Carolina. We know



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what makes us successful, and we are going to have a disciplined approach to that execution.

**JG:** We've never set out to be the biggest, we have just strived to be the best. We've said no to lots of opportunities because they weren't right for us. We just focus a lot on our community, on never bastardizing the brand—just staying focused on the things that make us special and different.

**One of the ways Barry's grows, internationally at least, is through partnerships. How do you ensure those partners are as disciplined and focused as you are?**

**JG:** We're in 15 countries, but we only have half a dozen franchise partners, so we're very selective with whom we partner. A few expectations from us are that, obviously, they are well-financed enough to be able to back up the growth that they're projecting. As important is the brand evangelism component. We've never partnered with an organization or a group of individuals who aren't obsessed with what we do and how we do it.

**JJ:** It boils down to one word: values. We spend a lot of time making sure we have alignment. That means we say no to a lot of potential international partners—and saying no to a new franchise partner is saying no to growth.

A little bit of Barry's trivia: our first international studio was in Bergen, Norway. Not the place you'd expect, right? And the reason it happened is Joey was introduced to a couple who owned gyms in Bergen. They came to the West Hollywood studio every summer and would take like 100 classes. Joey, you should actually tell this story ...

**JG:** They were obsessed and so passionate about what we did that we felt it was a winning recipe. And it was. It touches on something that continues to surprise me: this workout knows no cultural bounds. Whether you're taking a class in Sydney, Dubai, Doha, Oslo, Chicago, LA, Singapore—this workout brings people together. I'm continually surprised at our ability to be successful across all those different markets, because not many brands, especially in the fitness space, are able to cross cultural barriers. It's special to be under the red lights. And it's special, in a very divisive world, to help bring people together. ♦

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