A HEALTHY ATTITUDE
The Owner Of Vermilion Hills Health Club Knows The Business Takes A Lot Of Work.

Tell to people who are in the health club business (or even worse) and they'll likely tell you that's one of the most difficult businesses to start up and successfully run.

And considering the boom Vermilion Hills' new owner Mike Litell keeps, they're probably right. He arrives at the Hugh Walls Road facility Monday through Friday at about 5 a.m., leaves at about 10:30 p.m., returns on Saturday and Sunday mornings at 7 a.m. and leaves after 10 p.m.

"It has to be 100 percent service all the time," Litell says. "It's kind of like waiting tables from 5 o'clock in the morning to 10 o'clock at night. You have to really like it. You have to be willing to bend over backwards.

"Money isn't everything, time isn't involved. I think as long as I love coming here and love doing this work, it's worth it."

It's a misconception about making a lot of quick money that usually leads to the demise of health clubs, Litell says. People who run such clubs often immediately spend the money they make on themselves rather than putting it back into the club. "I think the majority of the money being made needs to stay in the club. Eventually it will pay off. But it takes a while."

And though he is being patient, Litell, who has seven years of experience in this field, admits he seized a special opportunity when he purchased the business from Dr. Michael Headee in January. Headee, who still owns the building and property, established a strong foundation and reputation for Litell to work with. Litell had managed the club for about a year and had worked in sales and marketing prior to that. They both agreed it had much more time to spend running the business.

In order to boost membership, Litell has established a more flexible policy. For example, people can join only to use the gym and take aerobics. When he took over there were 139 members; now there are 370. The numbers are a fair indication of the success of the new system, Litell says, because people usually end up using the other facilities. "Eventually everyone comes around to liking a full membership."

Vermilion Hills, which offers 10 tennis courts, a jogging track, two swimming pools, a gym, aerobics classes, a juice bar and health bar and a pro-shop, does on 21 units. A much larger gym, which would need in the current gym being converted into locker rooms, is in the works. Though it's still tentative, Litell says if everything goes as planned it could be completed by Christmas. "It's not going to be another building like this on the side of the river," he says.

Lately, there has been a trend of good health clubs, but Litell is somewhat very optimistic about the club's future. "The competition is good competition," he says. That's the reason he has and continues to learn from other clubs' mistakes and successes.

"We're kind of like the new kids on the block," he says of the 7-year-old business. "But we are here to stay."