



Philadelphia Inquirer

Winner of 20 Pulitzer Prizes

SUNDAY DECEMBER 23, 2018 | ESTABLISHED IN 1829 | PHILLYINQUIRER | EARLY SUNDAY EDITION | \$3

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Joe Zarett works with Tasha Taylor-Igbano, a manager of diversity communications. After enduring years of ankle pain from high school sports, she says Zarett's help has her "back in heels." BOB FERNANDEZ / STAFF

\$ MEDIA

On site, a rehab-fitness guru for aches and pains.

Keeping Comcast in shape

By Bob Fernandez
STAFF WRITER

Joe Zarett waves at the "wall of fame" at his rehab facility, just south of Rittenhouse Square. Pictured there: actor Sylvester Stallone, Philly boxer Bernard Hopkins, tennis great Pete Sampras, and the world's No. 2 female squash player, Egyptian Raneem El Welaily. They all sought Zarett's charismatic personality and famed

obsession for care. El Welaily, 29, was crying when she came to Zarett in 2014 with a badly twisted ankle. She injured herself in New York and feared she'd miss a Philadelphia tournament. But she made it to the finals after seeing Zarett. "Joe was the first doctor to treat me," she said by phone from Cairo.

This summer, Zarett opened his second rehab and fitness facility, in the Comcast Center,

about 10 blocks to the north. The idea: to make insurance-covered physical therapy an elevator ride away for many of Comcast's 8,000 downtown employees. It's also an amenity for those who can fork over \$125 an hour for fitness and strength training, stretching and massage when they come off insurance-covered treatment.

Comcast hopes to treat nagging. See **COMCAST** on E4

COVER STORY | MEDIA

Fitness guru keeps Comcast in shape

COMCAST from El going back, neck, shoulder, and ankle injuries before they become big health-care bills. Twenty-five percent of Americans suffer lower back pain over any three-month period, and it's the top cause of disability around the world, the American Physical Therapy Association says.

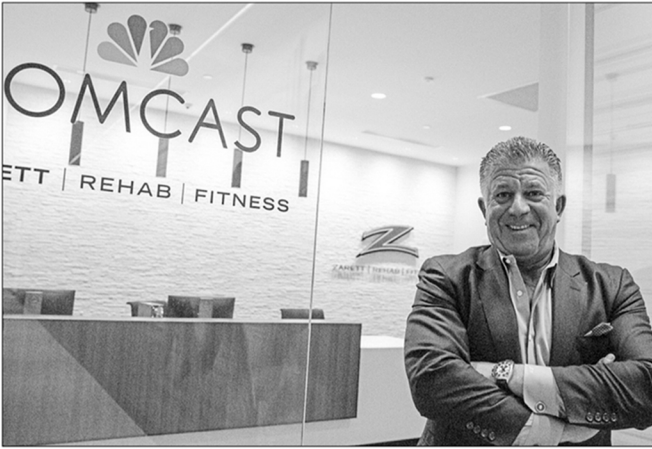
Zarett is known for his fierce focus on care, carefully planning regimens with his staff, or delivering them himself. Many of Comcast's top executives have been patients and are believers in his system.

Steve Burke, a top Comcast executive and marathon runner who was hired in 1998 in Philadelphia and now heads NBCUniversal in New York, said his body broke down after running 13 marathons. While living in Philadelphia on Delancey Street, Burke worked at Zarett's Rehab on the 500 block of South 19th Street for treatment and to work out, and then strode on to Comcast. Burke described Zarett's regimen as anaerobic, muscle strength, aerobic, weights, and manual therapy.

"That's Joe's crazy manic focus," said Burke. "There's nothing like what he does in New York."

Zarett enthusiastically agrees. "I don't believe there is a better place in the country with this level of care," he said recently as he toured his new 10,000-square-foot facility on the third floor of the Comcast Center, with private treatment rooms, weights, big rubber balls, and slides. "The model," he added, "has been to come for rehab and stay for fitness," which is about 50 percent of his business.

Zarett, who brands himself with a stylized "Z," is part of a trend among big tech companies to jazz up their campuses with amenities as they compete nationally for software engineers, designers, advertising executives, coders, and other specialty professions. The multi-billion-dollar Apple Inc. headquarters in Cupertino, Calif., boasts 1,000 bikes for traveling around the complex and a two-story stone-covered yoga room. The search-engine giant Google doloes out massage credits while



Joseph Zarett has opened a rehab and fitness facility in the Comcast Center, making physical therapy an elevator ride away for many of Comcast's 8,000 Center City employees. HEATHER KHALIFA / Staff Photographer

allowing employees time off to follow their passions.

"Low back pain and neck pain are two of the leading medical spend categories for companies, particularly because of sedentary behavior," said Jennifer Mahler Gamboa, the chief executive officer of Body Dynamics Inc. in Virginia, which operates physical therapy facilities on corporate locations. "I think it's a good move for everybody if you can get people active."

Gamboa said people with neck or back pain should seek treatment within 14 days — which can be difficult given the wait times for doctors and physical therapists.

Comcast has been proactive in recent years in its efforts to control health-care inflation. The company has venture investments into firms such as Accolade, in Plymouth Meeting, which helps employees navigate their health coverage and find cost-effective care. Comcast spends an estimated \$1.3 billion on health care.

Comcast/NBCUniversal chief medical officer Tanya Benenson said that NBCUniversal has

opened a medical clinic near its Rockefeller Center base to make checkups and other medical services convenient for NBCUniversal employees. They are finding it popular because of the convenience. "It's like this void, this vacuum," she said of medical services. "If you provide it, they will come."

Comcast isn't offering checkups in its downtown Philadelphia campus, which now includes two Comcast towers. But employees won't have to travel over the city or drive to the suburbs for physical therapy.

"Physical therapy is an underutilized tool to help with pain management and injury management," Benenson said. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended in March 2016, in the midst of the current opioid crisis, that doctors consider non-opioid drugs such as physical therapy for pain treatment.

William Strahan, the head of human resources at Comcast, injured his knee falling down at the 69th Street Station rushing for a train some years ago. He put off physical therapy for years.

"It was easy to say I have an excuse and I don't want to do this," Strahan said. With Zarett downstairs at the Comcast Center, there was no reason for Strahan to put off treatment. His doctor wrote out a prescription for his knee rehab and Strahan scheduled time at Zarett's.

"There are some athletes who are trying to get back to peak physical performances. That is not me," Strahan said. His knee is improving, Strahan said. He added that by going to Zarett, he hopes to set a tone with employees that "if I can do it, you can do it."

The venture is a risk for Zarett, 53, a Russian Jewish immigrant who came to Philadelphia with his family with only \$500 in 1979. He has almost doubled his square footage to 23,000 square feet on the 500 block of South 19th Street and significantly expanded his staff to 52 exercise physiologists, physical therapists, and massage therapists. He says it took two years to negotiate the contract for the new facility. Zarett's is located in the Comcast

Center's former gym, which has relocated to the Comcast Technology Center.

While Zarett's original location has private rooms, Zarett noted that the new facility in the Comcast Center has more privacy — "coworkers do not want to be screaming next to other employees when I am twisting them," he said with a laugh.

As for his relationships with top Comcast executives whom he has treated, Zarett said: "I am not mentioning any names. Comcast is a family, you know. You help one member of the family, they send their next of kin." Among those on Zarett's wall of fame are Comcast CEO Brian Roberts, vice chairman Neil Smit, and senior vice president Karen Buchholz, with her children.

"We have been asked to open up in Main Line," Zarett said. "But you know it's not like opening a McDonald's. What sets us apart is how hands-on this is. There are many chains out there. The only way for me to ensure the quality is that I have to be close. That is why [the Comcast Center] is something I could do."

Tasha Taylor-Igbano, 35, a manager of diversity communications, played basketball and volleyball in high school. For years, she had a nagging left-ankle injury. Playing in a city softball team, this year she had to wear a brace on it. But then she started twisting it regularly. She stopped wearing heels.

"My ankle would even give out when I got up from my desk," she said. Her husband told her this year that she should do something about it. She visited her podiatrist, who diagnosed tendinitis and recommended physical therapy — specifically Zarett.

"That's funny — they are opening in our building," she said. Zarett's staff evaluated her and worked both on strengthening her ankle and her lower body. After several months of treatment, Igbano said that "she's back in heels and I am at the end of my treatment plan."

✉ bfernandez@phillynews.com
☎ 215-854-5897
📧 @bobfernandez1