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The 'Mrs. Sporty' Style

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AND STEFFI GRAF HAVE
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MOST SUCCESSFUL
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The Mrs.Sporty triumvirate:
Valerie, L., and Niclas Bönström
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A sophisticated business model fashioned by a high-powered partnership has, in less than 10 years, transformed Mrs.Sporty, with more than 555 units, into Europe's largest women-only fitness franchise. The brand boasts small, chic spaces, user-friendly circuits, advanced training and nutrition programs, and best-practice operating systems. Credits: Valerie and Niclas Bönström, tennis legend Steffi Graf, and private-equity wunderkind Mark Mastrov.

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**Mrs.Sporty CEO
Valerie Bönström**

Valerie Bönström

The CEO of Mrs.Sporty and her high-powered team have created Europe's most successful women-only fitness franchise

By Jon Feld

CBI: Before entering the fitness industry, your background was in computer science and economics. What led you to fitness? Was it the influence of your husband, Niclas, and Mark Mastrov? Or the opportunity to help women improve their lives?

VB: Both of those things. In my youth, I loved outdoor and team sports, but fitness wasn't my thing. After college, I worked for Deutsche Bank in London, and as a software consultant and project manager for various customers, before starting my own consulting firm in 2000.

However, Niclas had helped develop the 24 Hour Fitness chain in Sweden and knew Mark Mastrov, who cofounded 24 Hour. Niclas and Mark share a passion for being at the forefront of the industry, offering services that cater to different target groups.

A decade ago, the women-only market wasn't properly developed in Germany. I was excited when they saw the demand and shared their vision with me—for women of all ages to live a better and happier life through regular physical activity.

They also asked the right question: "What should a fitness studio be like to make women with little time and limited sports experience feel comfortable, enabling them to pursue an effective exercise program?"

These considerations gave birth to the Mrs.Sporty philosophy. It calls for a 30-minute workout with a group of like-minded individuals, who make use of a circle of hydraulic machines in a friendly atmosphere, with continued trainer support and guidance, and a customized nutrition plan. When we started, this combination was a major innovation for the German fitness industry.

CBI: I'm sure it also helped to have a tennis legend like Steffi Graf on board. How did she get involved with Mrs.Sporty? What is her role, and how has it evolved over the past nine years?

VB: Stefanie certainly has been an asset. She's one of our cofounders, and was part of the development of the concept from the very beginning. Stefanie has always been focused on assisting and encouraging women to be physically active. She's helped to develop our complex and sustainable nutrition and training concept. Today, she remains an ambassador, promoting the benefits of women doing sports.

We've also published *The Mrs.Sporty Concept with Stefanie Graf: Passion for Life and Energy All in 30 Minutes*, a book that describes the advantages of the circle workout and the reasoning underlying the concept's efficiency.

Talking to and learning from her is very inspiring. The vision, focus, and drive that make a sports star are the same qualities that make a dynamic and successful entrepreneur.

CBI: You took over the management of the pilot Mrs.Sporty club. How did this come about, and what was it like for you? What's your role today? What's your husband's? →

Highlights

- » Tapping women-only
- » Affordable franchises
- » Named No. 1
- » Exercise + nutrition

Valerie Bönström, 33, the CEO of Mrs.Sporty, based in Berlin, received a degree in computer science and economics at Freie Universität in Berlin in 2002. The following year, she and her husband, Niclas, joined tennis legend Steffi Graf and 24 Hour Fitness cofounder Mark Mastrov to establish Mrs.Sporty, now among the largest franchisors in Europe. In 2004, Bönström stepped in to run the pilot club, and it was profitable almost immediately. Today, Mrs.Sporty has five company-owned clubs and more than 550 franchises in Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Slovakia, Spain, Poland, and the Netherlands. In 2006, *Impulse* magazine named Mrs.Sporty Germany's "Best Franchise Newcomer," and, in 2012, it dubbed the chain the country's No. 1 franchise overall. As Mrs.Sporty has grown, so has Bönström. She's completed the London Executive MBA Program at Dubai Financial Center and is currently working on her doctorate in business administration at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. ←

VB: Once we developed the concept, we needed to open a club to test it. When we launched the first one in Berlin in May 2004, I was still working at the university and as a consultant. However, due to team issues, I had to involve myself in the day-to-day operations of that club. It was a total cultural change to work with trainers and members instead of with students and companies.

But I was amazed at how well women responded to our program, and I was impressed to see them reach their goals.

Witnessing what positive effects sport has on women's self-esteem, appearance, and mood made my decision easy. I knew I wanted to use my experience to enable as many women as possible to reach their potential.

Today, I'm managing the global operations and development of Mrs.Sporty; Niclas is responsible for strategy and administration.

CBI: What does a typical club look like, in terms of size, amenities, and location?

VB: Since 2009, our clubs have had a unique design, centered on a light, clean, and motivating atmosphere. They're typically between 1,200 and 2,150 square feet, which includes a 650-square-foot workout area. Some offer showers, but most have a changing room, which keeps the initial investment costs down and allows lower break-even levels. Ideally, the clubs are located in the center of residential areas, making them easily accessible to our members. It's a big advantage when people can see our clubs when they're walking or driving by.

"We remain focused on the needs and requirements of our current members, franchisees, and potential members, and that gives us all the information we need. We set the highest expectations; we're never satisfied."

CBI: How many company-owned stores do you have vs. franchises? How quickly has your franchise network grown—and where? How much does a Mrs.Sporty franchise cost to open—all expenses included?

VB: We have five company-owned clubs and over 550 franchises, and many more signed contracts for franchises that will open over the next year.



Jake
Check In: 7:55am
Avg Class Plays/Wk: 3.2
Member Date: 12/2004

Andrea
Check In: 7:59am
Avg Class Plays/Wk: 2.5
Member Date: 3/2009
Invited Dana
Favorite Class: Fusion 235
Favorite Instructor: Erin

Dana
Check In: 8:01am
Avg Class Plays/Wk: 6
Member Date: 1/2013
Favorite Instructor: Sara

Filling Rooms All Day Long

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Since our first club in Berlin, our network has grown tremendously, and we've been adding 80 to 100 clubs per year. Most of the current clubs are located in Germany and Austria, but we've also expanded into Italy, Switzerland, Slovakia, Spain, Poland, and the Netherlands, thus far. The growth is based on the entrepreneurial commitment of our franchisees and our support structure. We've built an extensive system, including education for our franchisees, which is delivered via an intranet, online support, and through congresses and the Mrs. Sporty Academy.

The total investment, including the initial operating capital and machines, starts at about \$73,250. Many franchisees achieve a positive operating income within one to three months.

CBI: That's a very short time for a new club to make a profit.

VB: From day one, we've managed to combine excellent knowledge in different areas. Niclas and Mark provided core operational knowledge, from sales processes to daily reporting. Together with Elmar Tunz, the managing director of the Institute for Prevention and Aftercare (IPN) in Cologne, Germany, I developed and proved the training concept. My background helped us establish efficient operational processes as a franchisor, and an organized administration system that provides us with a good overview of the business.

CBI: How many franchises does your largest franchisee have? As you expand into new countries, will you utilize master franchise agreements?

VB: Today, more than 25% of our franchisees own more than one club. The largest operates four and is planning to open his fifth this year. Let me add

that most of our franchise partners are women, although we have many successful men. Our focus over the next few years will be to support and grow the number of multi-operators even more.

Until now, in all of the countries we've entered, we've used the typical direct, single franchise model because we see a huge potential for Mrs.Sporty. But we're now seeking master franchisees in some markets we've already entered, as well as in other countries in Europe.

CBI: Impulse magazine, which ranks the top 100 franchises annually, named Mrs.Sporty the No. 1 franchise system in Germany for 2012. How do you differ from other fitness franchises in the country?

VB: I'm not sure, since we don't compare. We remain focused on the needs and requirements of our current members, franchisees, and potential →

Lisa
Check In: 7:46am
Member Date: Guest

Daniel
Check In: 7:45am
Member Date: 11/2011
Invited Lisa
Favorite Class: Vibe 250

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members, and that gives us all the information we need. We set the highest expectations; we're never satisfied. The mantra for Mrs.Sporty is "continuous development, improvement, and innovation."

Shortly after Niclas and I opened the first Mrs.Sporty in Berlin, we posted a sign on the door, "No. 1 in Germany," which, at that time, meant our first club. Just three years later, we put the poster back up, as we suddenly had more clubs open than any other German operator. Since then, we've remained No.1.

CBI: Speaking of member needs, you cap club membership at 600 to 700 members. Why?

VB: Our trainers know our members by name and really care about motivating them to achieve their goals. That fact and the size of our facilities is why we have a maximum of 600 to 700 members per club, which enables the trainers to provide a level of attention that's almost

like personal training. The staff-to-member ratio is one trainer per 16 women—the circuit maximum—but in most clubs, there are two trainers for up to 18 members who are working out.

CBI: Please tell us more about your training and nutrition offerings. How do they work?

VB: The Mrs.Sporty training concept is based on a 30-minute training workout that focuses on the needs of women. As I mentioned, the program was developed in cooperation with the IPN in Cologne, and involves all of the muscle groups to improve strength and definition, as well as endurance and coordination. At the center of this effective workout program is hydraulic equipment that automatically adjusts to the individual needs of the user.

Also, in 2011, Mrs.Sporty developed a system that allows each member to determine the amount of carbohydrates, proteins, and fats in their nutrition plan.

When that's combined with regular exercise, most members can expect to lose one to two pounds per week. Our goal was to develop an organized, long-lasting weight and nutrition plan based on portion control and the systematic modification of eating habits.

And because the Mrs.Sporty workout focuses on building and maintaining muscle, it helps women maintain their weight once they've reached their goal.

CBI: You've been very successful. Any thoughts on either selling or going public in the future?

VB: No. We feel very fortunate to be working with a flexible and continuously improving business model. Our target market is growing, and we've developed a strong franchisor and franchisee team. We greatly enjoy working together, and we're looking forward to many more interesting opportunities with the great team we've built. —

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