

RiverFit Observational Data Summary

Dr. Heather Jamerson

hjamers@gmail.com

11/12/2014

Overview:

This summary offers some highlights from park observations prior to the RiverFit installations (8/17/2014-9/17/2014) compared to park observations after the RiverFit installations (9/25/2014-11/1/2014).

Observations are across different times of day and all days of the week and were conducted by Dr. Heather Jamerson and students from Rhodes College. All observations were standardized using an observational checklist that collected data on the number of people using the park, the race and gender of park users and the activities in which park users were engaged (e.g., running, sitting, walking, etc.). Additional qualitative details were recorded via detailed field notes that tracked the following themes: park user interactions, patterns of fitness-related activities, intergenerational exchanges, and RiverFit installation usage and dynamics. Field notes also include data from conversations with park users and fitness instructors related to the culture and activities common in Tom Lee Park and the River Fit installations and programming, more specifically.

Park Users:

Tom Lee Park and the River Walk Trail (including Vance Park and Butler Park) offer a dynamic public space where visitors can socialize, relax and engage in fitness-oriented activities. Baseline observations suggested that the demographics of the park were evenly distributed between African Americans and Whites and across men and women. Post-installation observations show a small shift in this pattern, which could be contributed to the volleyball court (which has attracted new White volleyball players) and the soccer field (which has attracted new Latino soccer players). Notably, however, Latino park users have not limited their park usage to the soccer field, but recently have been observed running, working out on the other RiverFit installations, and climbing the stairs for exercise. This suggests that the soccer field may be a means by which Latino park users familiarize themselves with the park and begin using it more frequently for personal exercise.

Demographics by Race

| | % Total Pre-Install | % Total Post-Install | % Change |
|--------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| Black | 53% | 48% | -5% |
| White | 45% | 45% | 0% |
| Other | 1% | 7% | 6% |

Demographics by Gender

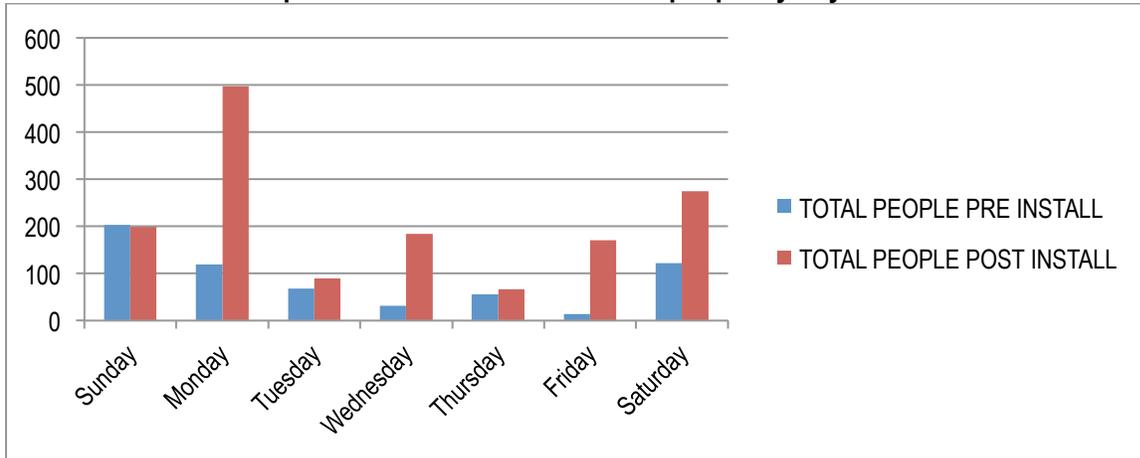
| | % Total Pre-Install | % Total Post-Install | % Change |
|---------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| Male | 45% | 52% | 7% |
| Female | 55% | 48% | -7% |

Park Peak Periods:

Baseline observations indicated that the weekends and Mondays were the days most popular with park users. These patterns have remained consistent since the RiverFit installations; however, Wednesday and Friday have become more popular with park users as well. Wednesday increases could be explained by the addition of a structured boot camp class during the evenings and Friday increases may be due to an after work Friday volleyball crowd. Most notably, however, is the spike in park usage on Monday, which is in part due to a loosely organized group of FedEx employees who have begun using the park for structured

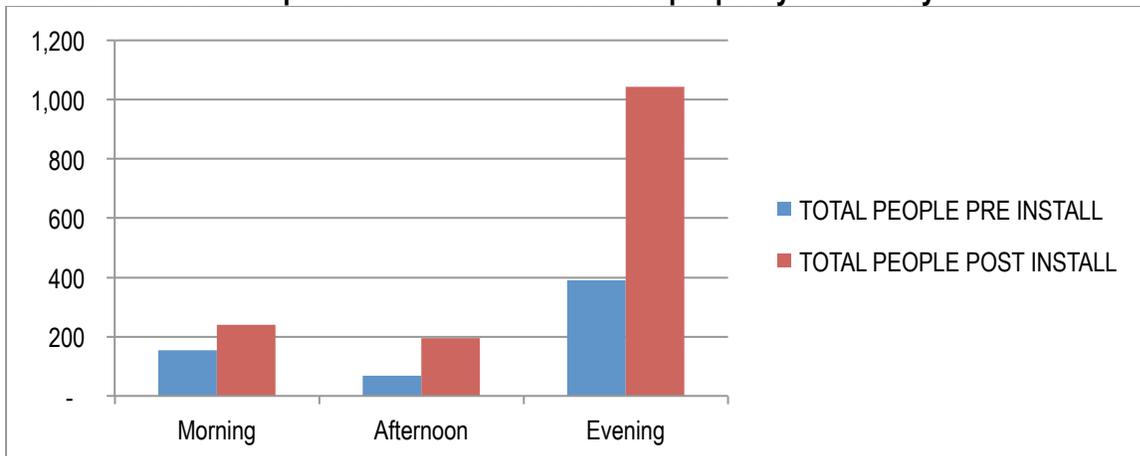
games (e.g., volleyball, flag football) and group fitness activities (e.g., hill running). This group of users does not receive any incentives from their employer, but rather was inspired by a charismatic leader who used the momentum of RiverFit as an impetus to encourage her team to become more active and physically fit on their day off. Notably, all of the days of the week show gains in park usage since the RiverFit project began. While the chart below does not reflect increases on Sundays, more recent data (not included in this report) captures the increased use of the soccer field during the past several Sundays and will likely show an upward trend more consistent with Saturday post-installation gains.

Chart 1: Pre/Post Comparisons: Number of observed people by day of week



Another notable consideration between baseline observations and post-installation observations includes comparative data for the time of day with the most park users. Chart 2 shows that all times of the day have experienced higher volume, with the most significant gains occurring in the evenings. The evening increases seem to be due to three factors: 1) evening boot camp classes and personal training sessions associated with the RiverFit project; 2) higher numbers of people coming to the park for structured games such volleyball and soccer; and 3) more people enjoying the park for fitness-related activities after traditional work hours. Based on interview data, this third group of people appears to be motivated by the nice Fall weather (e.g., cooler temperatures and lower humidity levels) and what they refer to as the “fitness culture” of the park (which will be discussed below).

Chart 2: Pre/Post Comparisons: Number of observed people by time of day



Park Culture

During many conversations at Tom Lee Park, patterns began to emerge about how park users understand the public park space, including the meaning of the riverfront park system both for themselves as individuals, as well as, for the larger Memphis community. Park users unanimously report that the riverfront park system is a significant asset to Memphis because of 1) its natural beauty along the Mississippi River, 2) its well-maintained green space, 3) its racial diversity and 4) the fitness opportunities it offers to the community. While the first two themes were prevalent in the baseline interviews, the third and the fourth themes have been more common after the RiverFit equipment was installed. Significantly, the respondents suggest that the installations accompany other fitness-related park changes, which include the increased number of structured fitness classes (e.g., boot camp) and personal trainers who utilize the park for private sessions. The addition of these fitness professionals (and their clients) seems to create a spillover effect that elevates the level of personal fitness activities among people already considered to be physically fit, as well as, users who have never used the park for fitness-related purposes. Observations support these findings since fitness professionals have been observed demonstrating RiverFit equipment and assisting other park goers in the proper and safe use of the Riverfit installations.

Taken together, observations and park user interviews point to the contours of what could be sociologically understood as a “fitness culture,” namely the shared values, norms and expectations that transcend individuals to create an overarching ethos of the public place that is organized to promote physical activities and healthy lifestyle choices. One respondent captures this sentiment with his commentary that he used to feel comfortable smoking in the park during his afternoon walks, but now he feels “guilty” to smoke while others around him are exercising. Instead he has chosen to leave his cigarettes at home and replace his afternoon walks with his old running patterns. Other respondents report similar changes in their personal choices that include more engagement with physical activities while at the park, which include trying the monkey bars with their children, challenging friends with the battle ropes, and playing an impromptu game of volleyball.

More data are required to understand larger patterns related to the park fitness culture; therefore, the following indicators are incorporated into a community survey that will be distributed via RiverFit social media outlets: feelings of safety and compliance with park rules, motivation to workout, enjoyment of the park and the RiverFit installations, the degree to which current fitness options assist users meet their individual fitness goals and promote intergenerational health/fitness-oriented play, and experiences of inclusion related to park diversity.

Installation Usage

A wide range of park users, ranging from fitness enthusiasts to parents playing with their children, have been observed using all of the RiverFit installations. Fitness enthusiasts utilize the majority of the installations as part of their cross-training experience, which incorporates running, stair/hill climbing, pull-ups, leg lifts, battle ropes and the obstacle course. The distance between the installations provides the fitness-oriented user the chance to sprint or jog in between equipment stations and often includes running the sidewalk loop of Tom Lee Park and the Riverwalk path near Vance Park and Butler Park. Some users punctuate the intensity of this workout by descending and climbing each stair set as they run the Riverwalk path. For these park users, the RiverFit installations appear like a natural extension of an already well-defined workout routine and often draw small crowds around the Pull-up, Battle Rope, or Abs stations as they engage in many different techniques to strengthen the upper body, legs and core. It is not uncommon for some of these more advanced users to elicit “wows” from the observers, which seems to motivate younger or less experienced users to try these stations once the more advanced user completes her/his

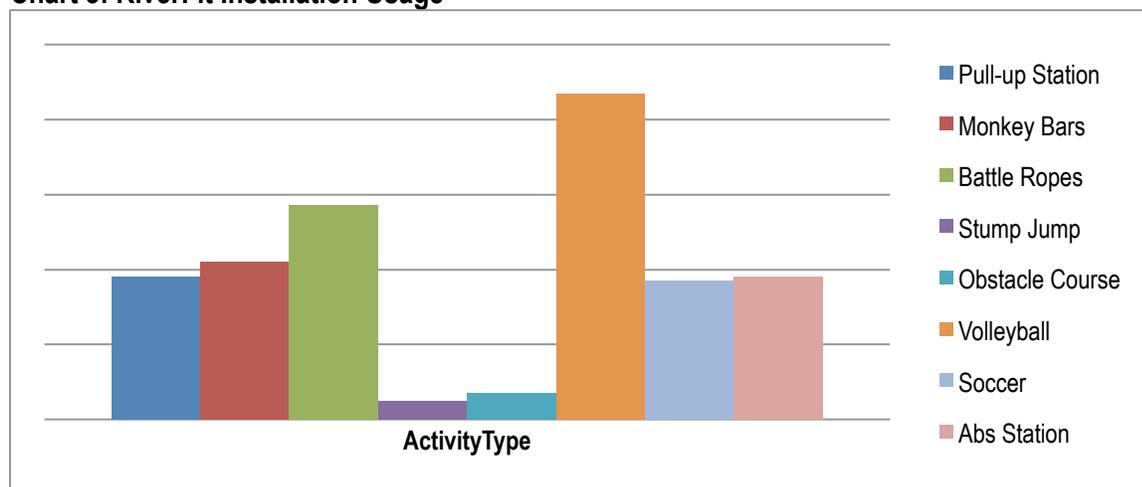
set. On several occasions, the fitness-oriented user has assisted or encouraged novice observers to try the station themselves. These interactions help establish the “spillover effect” and “culture of fitness” mentioned above, whereby people who generally would not partake in fitness-related activities are inspired and motivated to try them based on the “experts” who are using the installations as part of their regular work-out routines.

The moderately fit park user has also demonstrated patterns of using the RiverFit installations as part of their workouts. These users take things much slower and are less proficient in their mastery of the number of exercises that can be done on the equipment. However, they show a desire to use the installations to enhance their workout experience through their repeated sets on the same installation (e.g., multiple sets of leg lifts on the Ab station). Moderately fit users have also altered their typical weekly schedules to visit Tom Lee Park to play volleyball after traditional work hours and on the weekends. For these users, volleyball is not considered a “work out” but rather a fun activity to enjoy with friends that happens to promote a healthier lifestyle.

Perhaps the most interesting group of RiverFit installation users are the people who visit the park for other purposes, and yet find themselves inspired to try the RiverFit equipment. The ages of this user group range wildly from young children to senior citizens and they are most often dressed in clothes more consistent with a picnic than a workout (e.g., jeans, sweaters, skirts, loafer shoes). The baseline observations capture this group of park users sitting on park benches or blankets, enjoying sunsets, taking photographs or playing unstructured games with their children. The RiverFit installations, however, seem to provided an impetus for these users to try something new—which happens to involve activity and physical play. Even tourists have been observed walking immediately to the Battle Rope Station to try the ropes before snapping photographs of the river.

Chart 3 provides a visualization of the RiverFit installation usage patterns.

Chart 3: RiverFit Installation Usage



Volleyball: Without question the most popular installation is the volleyball court. On Friday evenings and weekends it has not been uncommon for the volleyball court to be lined with camp chairs and coolers as people cycle in and out of the community volleyball game. Immediately following the RiverFit Opening the

volleyball courts attracted mostly White users, ranging in age from 20-35. However, in more recent weeks the demographics of volleyball court users has become more diverse across race and age. Part of this pattern might be explained by the fact that the park did not provide a ball so players need to plan ahead and bring their own equipment. It seems that a wider range of people are now bringing their own ball to the park and enjoying the volleyball courts. Another important feature of the volleyball courts is the way in which they accommodate families with small children who can play in the “sandbox” of the second court while the adults play volleyball on the other court.

Battle Ropes: The second most common installation is the Battle Rope Station and is perhaps the favorite RiverFit installation across all park users. Every demographic category of park users (across race, age and fitness levels) seems to enjoy using the battle ropes for personal fitness and for general play.

Abs Station: While the ab station has drawn some criticism from park users due to its uncomfortable design, the incline bench on the right side of the station offers a very popular opportunity for leg raises. This station is very common among structured exercise classes and is used very frequently by both the fitness-enthusiast and the moderately fit user discussed above. People who visit the park for picnics or sunsets rarely attempt to use this installation, even though children seem to enjoy climbing up the steep inclines. This installation may benefit from a more comfortable design (e.g., pads for bench and foot bar) that enables users to diversify their ab exercises.

Soccer Field: During initial post-RiverFit observations the soccer field was rarely utilized; however, in recent weeks a group of teenagers and young adult men have been congregating to play soccer on Sundays. Additionally, other days of the week have experienced an increased number of small groups (2-4 users) of people beginning to use the soccer field. Significantly, these users are mostly Latino and were not previously observed in the Park. These early data could suggest that the soccer field may promote a more diverse park space that draws users from parts of the city that has not historically been represented at Tom Lee Park.

Monkey Bars: The monkey bars are the clearly the “kids pick” as a favorite RiverFit installation. When kids are present at the park (e.g., evenings and weekends), the monkey bars are often surrounded by adults and children who are waiting their turn to try to traverse the rungs. This provides an exciting observational opportunity since children often enjoy monkey bars on the playground of their schools. This exposure means that they are usually quite skilled at maneuvering across the rungs and can draw quite an audience of adults and other youth. The enthusiasm of their success is often followed by “now you try!” to an adult parent or guardian. Adults have often attempted to meet the challenge and have tried the monkey bars dressed in their jeans and loafers. The dynamic created by the monkey bars allows the youth to be the expert and to “coach” adults on proper techniques and strategies to complete the task. Moreover, the monkey bars provide an opportunity where adults and children can engage in healthy activities that are perceived as fun and enjoyable by the whole family.

Pull Up Station: Fitness enthusiasts are very skilled at the pull-up station and engage in a range of exercises, which are quite impressive to observe. These exercises require considerable upper body and core strength, thus limiting the accessibility of the pull-up station for moderate or novice park users. Despite the challenge of using the pull-up station effectively for exercise, tourists, children and casual park users may still attempt a pull up even if they cannot fully complete one alone. Fitness enthusiasts have been observed assisting more novice users (often children) by helping them complete the pull ups.

Obstacle Course: Fitness enthusiasts and moderately fit users have reported that they like this installation and the bark chips are often pushed to the side suggesting that this installation is used. However, park observations have not captured very much usage of this installation. Moreover, interviews suggest that people may believe that ropes are too high for most users to avoid tripping. Other feedback suggests that the inputs on the installation are of a lower quality than the other RiverFit equipment and may require repairs and/or adaptations.

Stump Jump: Feedback on the Stump Jump station has varied significantly, ranging from fitness enthusiasts loving it to parents hating it. Observations have captured only a few people using the installation correctly and some people have been seen falling off during the jumping exercises.

Conclusion

Based on data collected to date, the River Fit evaluation results are overwhelmingly positive. More people are visiting the downtown river park system and they are more likely to engage in fitness activities. Data patterns suggest a higher level of intergenerational play and activities that promote interactions across diverse social groups. Moreover, the range of people across various fitness levels who are involved in personal workouts, structured fitness activities, or active play points to a culture of fitness that transcends individuals and routinizes norms, values and behaviors that are consistent with a healthy community.