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MORE THAN BUSINESS

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Ric Rooney, owner of Pikes Peak Hyperbaric, wants to build a hyperbaric gym and research center in Colorado Springs.

Rooney believes in hyperbaric benefits and business

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Ric Rooney is an athlete, a businessman and a believer in mild hyperbaric oxygen therapy.

For more than two years he has provided pressurized oxygen therapy to clients in Colorado Springs and Denver at Pikes Peak Hyperbaric. He has seven mild hyperbaric chambers, where people breathe in ambient air purified up to 50 or 60 percent oxygen for 60 to 90 minute sessions.

Now, he is trying to fashion a deal that would make hyperbaric oxygen therapy more accessible, more affordable and put Colorado Springs on the map for mild hyperbaric oxygen therapy research.

Rooney's plan is to build a hyperbaric gymnasium, where oxygen is pumped in at the same rate as in the mild hyperbaric chambers. In a gym, clients could exercise or work on physical therapy while taking in the added oxygen.

He also wants to create a hyperbaric research center, where tests and studies on the use of oxygen therapy can be done. His goal is to have the gym and center built in the first quarter of 2012.

"The goal is to bring hyperbaric within striking distance of the majority of the population," Rooney said.

Hyperbaric chambers, those that provide 100 percent oxygen, have existed for centuries but became known in the U.S. in the 1930s when the military started using hyperbaric chambers for deep sea divers with decompression sickness. Today, hyperbaric oxygen therapy is approved by Medicare for 14 illnesses, including carbon monoxide poisoning and thermal burns. It costs from \$800 to \$1,200 an hour.

In recent years, mild hyperbaric chambers, which are filled with compressed ambient air from 2 to 4.5 pounds per square inch or equal to 11 feet below sea level, have made headlines too as professional athletes have touted the use of the chambers as part of injury rehabilitation. The canvass chambers cost about \$20,000 and are FDA approved to be operated in the home or sub-acute clinics, like Rooney's. He charges \$50 an hour.

Rooney explains: the increased pressure allows the blood plasma to absorb additional oxygen, which increases oxygen to damaged tissue. That allows increased circulation to areas with swelling or

inflammation and a faster healing time, he said.

Making a believer

Rooney, owner of Sun Spot Atlantis Tanning Salon and Physique Transformation, was feeling a lot of pain in his shoulder when he worked out. Years earlier he had torn his rotator cuff. Doctors told him the pain was inevitable.

He had read an article about NFL football player Terrell Owens, who credited his six-week recovery of a shattered ankle to mild hyperbaric oxygen therapy. Rooney tried the therapy for 30 days.

"It does not cure arthritis — it does pull pain and inflammation out of my shoulder," he said. "But, it was the rest of the way I felt. I feel like my 35-year-old self again."

By now, he estimates he has spent 400 hours in a mild hyperbaric oxygen chamber.

Rooney and his son Jesse visited the Hyperbaric Therapy Center in Georgia and saw that clients at the center went beyond athletes. Children with Autism, cancer patients and U.S. Soldiers with traumatic brain injury were using the mild hyperbaric oxygen chambers.

"Seeing how it worked with very sick people, that was a very emotional experience," Rooney said.

It made him a believer, he said. He opened Pikes Peak Hyperbaric in Colorado Springs and in Denver and has about 2,000 client visits a year. Last year, he bought three chambers that can be rented out and used in the home at a cost of \$1,695 for 30 days. Annual gross profit for the business is about \$100,000.

Beyond athletes

Five days a week Donna Scott climbs into a soft cell hyperbaric chamber at Pikes Peak Hyperbaric in the Springs. She has adenocarcinoma, a non-smokers lung cancer, and has had radiation in her lungs. The oxygen therapy, she believes, is helping heal the burns inside her body caused by radiation.

"I feel better, I can breathe better for some time afterward," she said.

Her tests show a decrease in metabolic activity since she started the oxygen therapy one year ago. Her doctor is pleased with the results, but not ready to say Scott's cancer is diminished because of oxygen therapy, she said. She is trying other treatments in conjunction with oxygen therapy.

"I believe (hyperbaric therapy) is part of my recovery program,"

she said.

Scott, with her husband Richard Scott, did their research. One thing oxygen therapy is known for, he said, is building up the immune system, which is key for cancer patients.

The Scotts have taken Donna's cancer battle to four states, seeking out the best treatments. TriCare, their medical insurance, is not covering the hyperbaric oxygen treatment — yet, Richard Scott said. He has challenged the payment and is hopeful that mild hyperbaric oxygen therapy will become a treatment covered by insurance.

"An oncologist will not make a move outside a stack of clinical studies," Scott said. "Why are we doing HBOT now? I'll tell you why, we don't have time for them to figure this out. She doesn't have time."

Future of mild hyperbaric

Rooney had no intention of starting a third business. But, he is convinced that as more research is done on the effects of oxygen therapy, more people will demand it.

In a small gym, he could accommodate up to 20 people per hour instead of two.

"In a large facility, I can knock that price (per hour) down," Rooney said.

He expects the mild hyperbaric gym to cost about \$400,000 not including land. He's in talks with his bank for an SBA-backed loan and has hired a realtor to hunt for a location to build a small dome-shaped building. He projects annual revenue of the gym to be about \$600,000, he said.

The gym would be connected to the Mild Hyperbaric Research Center and even the finance structure would be something different, said Mike Schmidt, CEO of Ensemble Ventures, who is working with Rooney on business development. The research center would be set up as a low-profit limited liability company, or L3C, which would allow both private funding and nonprofit funding.

Schmidt believes he can raise \$3 to \$5 million for the research center and the gym using the L3C business structure. It's a way to attract venture capital, angel investors, grants and foundation dollars, he said.

"A lot of people are excited about the idea of Colorado Springs becoming the center of the universe for mild hyperbaric research," Rooney said. "We could have the first (hyperbaric) gym in the country." ■ *CSBJ*