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Barack Obama will be the first self-confessed gym addict to occupy the White House. **David Minton** asks if he can help shape a nation, and get it IN shape.

Fit to govern

I know President-elect Barack Obama has already filled acres of newsprint but could I ask you to indulge me for one more page? Chicago is not only home to Obama and his family but also to one of the best fitness clubs I've ever been to. I don't know why I haven't told you about the East Bank Club before, but let me make amends now.

Long considered the most successful, individual, high-end, niche, urban club in the US, the East Bank club has around 11,000 members paying up to \$155 per month for a range of activities and facilities that spread out over its 450,000 sq ft. The East Bank Club does dwarf most other clubs you've ever seen, not just in provision of facilities but also in service levels. To paraphrase a certain advert: Four Seasons Hotels don't do sports clubs, but if they did it would probably be called the East Bank Club. It's estimated that this club generates \$18m annually on membership fees alone and the wide range of compelling secondary spend opportunities more than doubles this figure. So it will come as no surprise that the Obama family will miss this club and its facilities when they move to DC full time from January. Obama has a personal trainer at the club, it's where he works out on a regular basis and he plays basketball, his favourite sport, each week.

So imagine the scene: it's the morning after the night before; just 12 hours ago he delivered his victory speech that could have been an invitation for the nation to heal itself, as he expounds in his pastoral style: "I know you didn't do this just to win an election and I know you didn't do this for me. You did it because you understand the enormity of the task that lies ahead." He was, of course, speaking about the two wars, the planet in peril and the worst financial crisis in a century but we can guess that some things that went unsaid will be a high priority too. So, of all the pressure and calls on his time on that famous morning, when the world's media were clamouring for a word, Obama goes to his club for a workout.

During all the pressure, media clamour, and calls on his time that famous morning, Obama chose to go to his usual fitness club for a workout

But that morning Obama (and the East Bank Club) got a taste of his future life. As President-elect the security level had overnight been upgraded from 'campaign mode' to include heavily armed Presidential secret service agents in two identical black armoured limousines. These agents not only escorted him through the Chicago streets like a Ridley Scott movie – think Black Hawk Down without the gunfire – but they go into the club too. These agents will be with him for the rest of his life and from January, whenever he moves out of the White House, a hazardous materials truck, a decoy vehicle, a communications vehicle and a counter-assault team in a 4x4 will join the armoured convoy.

Two days later, these heavily-armoured limousines were outside one of the newest clubs in Washington. Takehia Wheeler was at the reception desk at the Columbia Heights Washington Sports Club when armed security guards ushered Obama in for a quick workout but plucky Takehia didn't recognise who was the centre of attention, so asked him for his ID card. Of course, as soon as he told her his name she realised what she'd done. It seems Obama has wasted no time in taking membership at the 19 strong DC-wide Washington Sports Club group; although his main club will be closer to the White House at Gallery Place/Chinatown, he can call in at any location for no additional payment.

I can't imagine this is anything more than an interim measure, until the basketball court, along with the gym, is installed for everyone to use in the 'West Wing' – but it sure comes as a bit of a shocker that the President-elect just pops in to a gym like most people pop into a coffee shop.

For the first time a gym addict is heading for the White House. Obama loves sport and he's said publicly and openly that sport changed his life and helped shaped him as a person. He has worked as a sports activist at the grassroots with communities in his beloved Chicago. He's witnessed firsthand the power that sport has to change people's lives. If Obama gets behind Chicago's Olympic bid for 2016, you can probably say it's a done deal.

Olympics or not, I'm sure Obama will add the legacy of a healthier nation to his hit list. The relationship between Obama and the electorate is more personal than any other presidential candidate has ever enjoyed. He has 10 million online-registered supporters and I'm one of them. He raised an estimated \$500m in small donations via the internet, his campaign team used digital technology's most

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up to date viral marketing tools – even I was chuffed to get a text announcing Joe Biden as his running mate before it was announced to the media. He loves his BlackBerry and literally has hundreds of thousands of Facebook 'friends' and even more 'friends' on 14 other social-networking sites. Much has been made of the YouTube election night coverage and along with his own blog and BarackTV it's compelling to get involved if you're interested in change, or if you're a Democrat, anywhere in the world.

So let's run some 'what-ifs', just for fun. What if he turns the power of his established internet-, technology- and blogosphere-savvy campaign towards shaping public opinion and creating mass behavioural change? What if he targets the health of the nation next? What if obesity over the next four years becomes as polarised as American politics? What if communication on changing individual lifestyles takes place in ways never seen before? What if 52% of the popular vote decides to follow their leader's example? What if, in four years time, you can spot a fitter, healthier Democrat at 50 paces, while the Republicans remain convinced a pill or health insurance will do the trick one day.

In *The Audacity of Hope, Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, Barack Obama talks about tackling the health care crisis head on; nurturing family life, community spirit and living a healthy lifestyle. During the long campaign, the president-elect came to be known as No-Drama Obama for his even temperament. No matter how gruelling the diary, regular sports sessions and workouts were sacrosanct. Simply by inhabiting the White House, Mr and Mrs Obama will be making political history; Malia, who's 10 and Sasha 7, are both into their sports and they will be making history too. Together they will set the nation an example, perhaps an example that can turn the obesity tide. If anyone can Obama can.

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