

BY THERESE IKNOIAN

second coming

Modern and even ancient civilization has always exercised, but it was usually a simplistic task that mimicked day-to-day activities. You know, like running 26 or so miles to Athens to deliver a message, heaving stones around a field, or perhaps climbing to the top of the great Pyramids. There are even records that seem to indicate the Romans had something akin to today's treadmill. Whatever it was, those folks didn't need, want or even imagine something new, something cool, something hot, or something tricky and trendy. It was all about function. They probably never dreamed to apply the words "fun," "results" or even (huh?) "fat burn" to what they were doing.

Ah, but times have changed. As civilization progressed (we use that word loosely) into the latter part of the 20th century, technological toys became the norm, and people needed entertainment and a constant stream of information-in, information-out to stay interested; the simplistic rock-heaving and marathon-trotting of yore vanished. In their place came triple-ply rubber belts, blinking LEDs, touch-screen TV monitors so users could multi-task, and a quest for fun, results and ease. Oh, and fat-burning.

"Exercise is boring, and this is America," said Richard Miller, president of Manhattan-based retailer Gym Source, talking to GearTrends while juggling two cell phones, ordering drinks for dinner, and maneuvering his way toward a restaurant. "People get tired of their toys very quickly. We need something new to get people moving—and to get people to purchase."

As modern society became progressively fatter and less fit in the last couple of decades, the never-ending quest for a new equipment gizmo or widget to make physical activity attractive became a powerful driver. Despite our ancestors spending a lot of time doing strength-training (remember the rock-heaving?), our modern quest has seemed to focus on aerobic training—the stuff that today's fitness magazines always, painfully, call the likes of "fat-zapping."

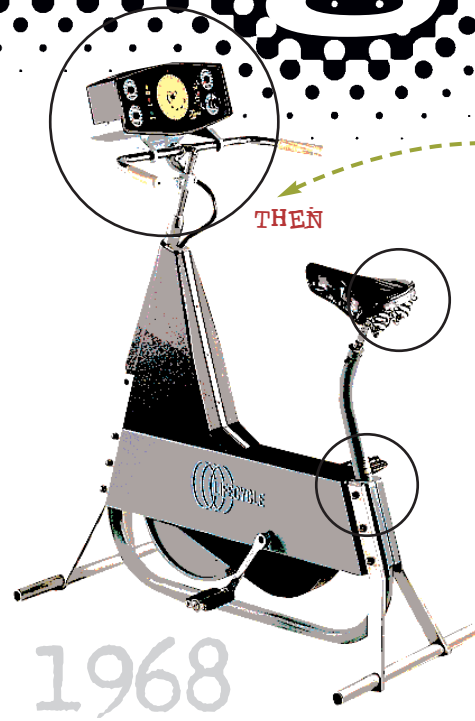
LIFECYCLE STARTS THE CRAZE

Today's still nascent fitness industry perhaps made a huge leap forward with the introduction of the computerized Lifecycle in 1968 (for that, Augie Nieto, you will go down in the books). Although it took nearly a decade to finally make it into health

clubs, Lifecycles quickly became the must-have and must-use piece, replacing all those now "archaic" (oh, how jaded we are) cycle ergometers.

Next up on the Hit Parade some nine years later in 1986 was the StairMaster, that stepping monster that at first caused a lot of shoulder and elbow tendinitis. The Lifecycles quickly became what you only idled your time on in a club til you got your turn to step away, likely slouched over the display panel. Both pieces were both quickly imitated (and imitation, as we know, is the greatest flattery ... and lawsuit fodder). Both took a few years after their intros to make it to the home front, but that they did.

Next on the cardiovascular front of favs came Precor's elliptical in 1995, yet another nine years later. (Same span as from Lifecycle to StairMaster. Is that timing just a coincidence?) So now StairMasters became where you merely idled away until you could nab the next free elliptical (oh, how fickle we are). Along the way were other blips: the swinging Sky-Walker that died quietly but gave TV pitchman Tony Little a life beyond what he ever expected; Tectrix's VR interactive bikes that were wondrous but unfortunately way before their time; the long-gone XL100 Cross Conditioner that was too odd of a mish-mash of cross-country skier and treadmill to catch the wave; and dual-action treadmills, like True's manu-



Whether the industry needs it or not, backroom tinkerers are working away to create the elusive "NEXT NEW THING" that will take the market by storm.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LIFE FITNESS AND NAUTILUS.



So here we sit, now eight years after the intro of The Last New Thing, the elliptical. Maybe this means we are destined—if history does really repeat itself—to see another new thing in the next year—when we again hit that magic nine-year span.

YES, WE DO NEED A NEW THING

So we aren't a society of exercise purists, folks who are caveman-ish in their desire to sweat, no matter what, with or without motivation or entertainment. We all agree on that. But with only two of 10 of us likely using any of the current Things, you would think all those other folks would find some stimulation in the updated and computerized bikes, steppers, treadmills and ellipticals of today.

Maybe yes and maybe no. All those couchwarmers may have tried something and given up. They may have heard a friend talk about something, and decided it wasn't for them. Or they may have seen something in an advertisement and just not been grabbed for whatever reason that may have had utterly nothing to do with exercise but more with their current emotional or life state.

So, says fitness marketing consultant Phil Trotter, with the yes-we-need-new side of the argument, we have to keep dangling new stuff in front of them, with the constant message that it's "easy," "fun" and "it

gets results." And someday we may intrigue enough to wrest Fred and Wilma away from the remote.

"Why is it we have to have this continual barrage of new things?" Trotter asked. "For the 80 percent who don't exercise at all, they will all think, 'With this, maybe I could.'"

That's perhaps the altruistic-sounding view—that the industry only digs for new things to get people less fat and more fit. But lest we forget, companies are all about competition and selling product. What company doesn't want to have the new thing that everybody wants to, one, sell and, two, buy—and perhaps with it develop consumer awareness of their company name—like the direct-to-consumer Bowflex has done so well. In this case, that Next New Thing is maybe just about—admit it—making money.

Says Gym Source owner Richard Miller, "It gets people in the door to look around and then to buy."

NO, WE DON'T NEED A NEW THING

In the clubs or among enthusiasts, we at GearTrends are skeptical any new thing really drives new people in the club door. Basically, the elliptical simply stole most people from the StairMaster, while the StairMaster simply transferred most from the Lifecycles before them.

al True Natural Trainer introduced in 2000, which was pulled a year or two later with hopes of re-launch.

"Does the industry need a new widget?" asked Peter Haines, director of The Super Show and former CEO of Cybex. "Probably not. The old widget was probably just fine."

But does the industry drool for a new widget? Yes, Haines and others say. Exercise purists may pooh-pooh the need for new stimulation, instead wanting to focus on each bead of sweat or muscle contraction. But the fact that only about two of every 10 Americans actually exercises enough to do much good means there is indeed a large audience of non-purists—the ones who watch infomercials and late-night TV, hoping against hope they will catch the bug. People all know they should exercise, surveys have shown that repeatedly in the last decade, but they lack the motivation, and they hope that something, somewhere out there will provide it. And maybe it'll be that new equipment widget.



66 As with Precor's elliptical and the Bowflex, it's unlikely

Growth? Not much. But once that new thing makes it to the retailer, what happens is up for grabs. Newcomers may really get themselves in the door. They may actually buy the New Thing. But, don't kid yourself, that new piece may actually only be the carrot. Consumers may actually be sold on something else instead, something that is actually (gasp) old, but new for them—if retailers are doing their job to help a buyer select what is best suited for his or her needs.

Herewith is the school-of-thought that says, no, we don't need a new thing, thank you very much. Please, what we really need is education of the consumer so they will simply motivate themselves to do something. Our first SNEWS survey of fitness retailers (published in this GearTrends magazine, page 16) found many of them actually believe the industry doesn't need a new thing. Rather, what they said they wanted to see was more and better education. Surprise, all you manufacturers, not everybody is beating down your door for a new widget to sell. And, in fact, some of your retailers would like to tell you something that they told us: Put some money instead into consumer education and awareness.

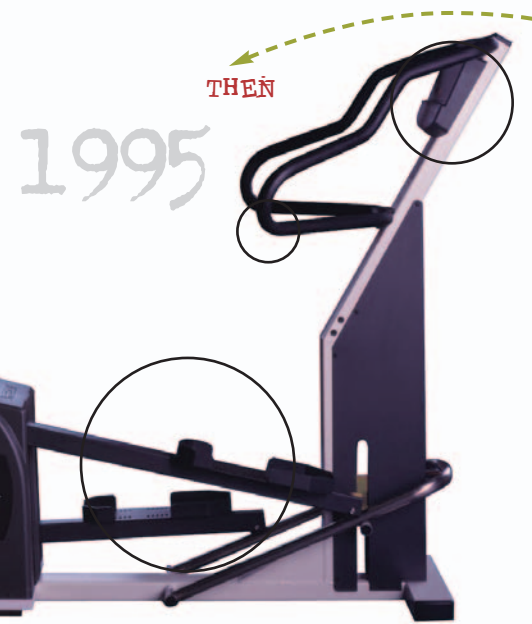
"Educating the consumer on benefits

and how to exercise ... that's what's going to help the industry," Mike Lyons, owner of the Fitness Outlet and Professional Fitness Concepts in the Chicago area, told GearTrends. "The more we educate the consumer, the more likely they'll continue with their programs." Or, we'd dare add, start a program and perhaps buy something for the program.

"This needs a broader approach than a 'Thing,'" Precor President Paul Byrne said. "A thing can bring somebody in, but if that person thinks that one machine is the answer, they're wrong. Education is the answer."

SOMETHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

No matter whether you believe the pro or con of the need for a new piece of equipment, we know and you know that inventors inside and outside of companies are tinkering away. We know for a fact from our (off-the-record) chats with some manufacturers that there are interesting concepts floating around out there that may, even soon, make it into an exhibit hall. That's



not to say that whatever it is will actually be a new way of moving. There is already fine equipment out there to simulate walking, running, pedaling, cross-country skiing, climbing, stair-climbing, rowing, skating, paddling and swimming.

We think new introductions will be some version of the above, some refinement, some attempt at making it—here we go again—easier, more comfortable and more fun, with the constant tease of more results more quickly.

"Maybe it's not a totally new way to move, but a variation on current ways to move or a combination of ways," speculated Joe Alter, president of Smooth Fitness.

That's certainly where some attempts at new things of late have fit in: Cybex's Arc-Trainer is a bit like stepping. But different. Nautilus' direct-to-consumer TreadClimber is a bit like stair-climbing. But different. NordicTrack's stubby little Incline Trainer treadmill is still all about walking and running, except on really steep inclines or on declines.

"Visually, there's a new story to tell," Alter added. "And it's perceived as a new thing."

With today's society's quest to get more things done at once and to always have variety, we think—and that is verified in conversations—the trend will be toward dual-action and combo-movements so the machine is adaptable to different needs and therefore also to different people in one household: Treadmills with some arm action, like ellipticals have upper-body components. Or treadmills that morph into some other perception of activity like the TreadClimber seems to do.

The key, all we talked to agreed on, is

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PRECOR.



Unfortunately, its motor is inside playing video games.

Kids spend several hours a day playing video games and less than 15 minutes in P.E. Most can't do two push-ups. Many are obese, and nearly half exhibit risk factors for heart disease. The American Council on Exercise and major medical organizations consider this situation a national health risk.



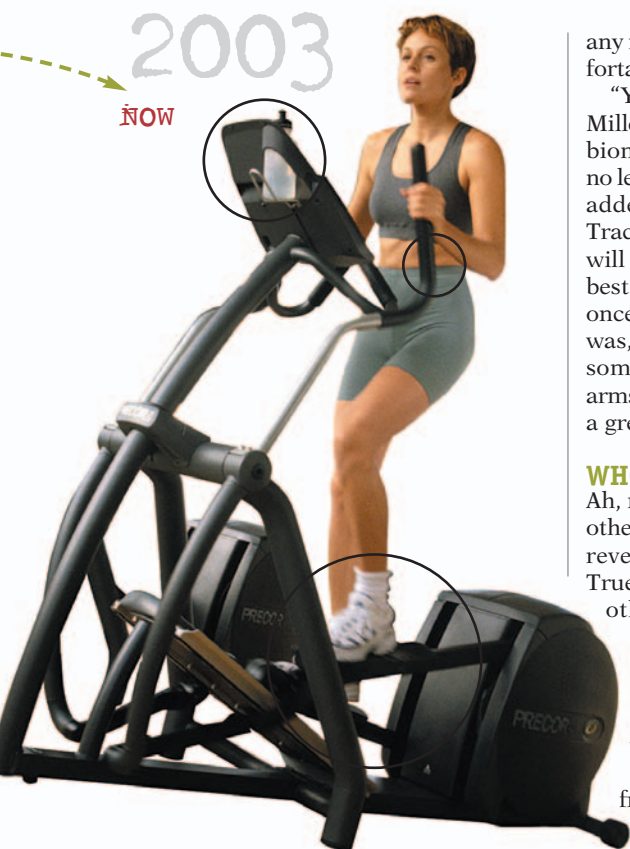
Youth Program of the American Council on Exercise®

You can help. Your donation of commercial fitness equipment to Operation FitKids directly enables children to experience the benefits of physical activity. Give ACE a call and see what more you can do to get these little engines fired up. Together, we can get kids moving again. Then maybe the video games will start collecting some dust.

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another smash hit will come from inside corporate walls. ”



any movement must feel natural, feel comfortable and be safe.

“You can move in crazy, wild ways,” Miller of Gym Source said, “but it must be biomechanically correct” and must have no learning curve. The learning curve, some added, was a problem with the Nordic-Track cross-country ski simulator. No one will argue it didn’t deliver just about the best and most natural workout around—once you got the hang of it. The problem was, the learning curve was too steep and some folks never could coordinate their arms and legs properly. Feeling stupid isn’t a great selling point.

WHO HAS WHAT?


Ah, now, we can’t give away the secrets of others. But let’s just say—as if this is some revelation—that Nautilus, Precor, Icon, True, Life Fitness and SportsArt, among others, are all tinkering in their back shops. But, as Bowflex inventor Dosho Shifferaw points out to GearTrends: As with his Bowflex and Precor’s elliptical, it’s unlikely another smash hit will come from inside corporate walls. “Innovation usually doesn’t come from a board room, but from individuals,” he said. “And right now the in-


dustry is kind of stagnant. It’s me-too. Everybody has an elliptical. Everybody has weights. Everybody has treadmills.”

He is one outside innovator who will tell you he too is working on something rather provocative. But who will be the first to the next Lifecycle, StairMaster or elliptical? Hard to say, since even the big guns may not know if that Next New Thing will land in their inbox tomorrow. Or next week. The “crazies” out there are the ones who are each month sending out dozens of proposals—from CAD designs to napkin sketches—to every big name or not-so-big name company. The executives just have to take the time to open the envelopes, read the plans, and be able to have the right instinct about whether the design is whacko or right-on.

As the quest for the Next New Thing continues, companies will still keep the roll-outs happening; sometimes they themselves won’t really know what will grab the consumer and make the piece shoot to the top of the charts. Heck, even the Bowflex languished for a number of years before it gained star status. But that gamble won’t stop everyone from trying.


“Everybody,” said retailer Mike Lyons, “is trying to get the next Golden Goose.”





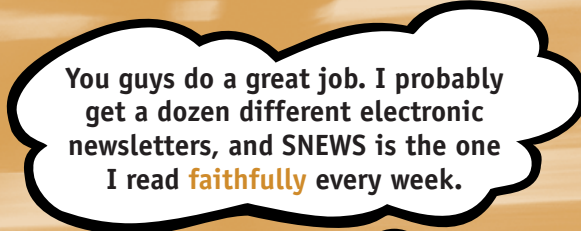
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Jerry Greenspan, retail owner, Exercise Equipment Experts, Columbus, Ohio



You guys do a great job. I probably get a dozen different electronic newsletters, and SNEWS is the one I read **faithfully** every week.

Peter Haines, director, The Super Show, former Cybex CEO

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