

Jump it up

BY MICHAEL HODGSON

THANKS TO GENEROUS MAINSTREAM MEDIA EXPOSURE

and a large dose of Bowflex and Bowflex-like commercials in the last several years, strength-training is a phrase being uttered by more than Atlas, Arnold and LaLanne types who seek to entertain us with dancing pecs and by towing boats. While no expert in his right mind will claim that the strength segment will ever grow or realize the sales volume of the cardio segment, sales numbers of home gyms and free weights and benches are up. And they look to keep increasing in the years to come.

NOT AN EITHER/OR CHOICE

Consider that a study by IHRSA of club users revealed that two of three club members—33.8 million total in the United States, the group says—also work out at home. Although it appears from tracking fitness store sales over the last 10 years that the fitness boom has flattened somewhat, it is evident that the fear consumers would abandon home-training in favor of clubs—or vice-versa—is unfounded.

“People are choosing more and more to populate both categories—home-training and club membership,” said Michael Rojas, president of Iron Grip. “We’re finding that, as the study has revealed, a lot of folks that train at clubs have home gyms as well.”

Rojas points out that over the last six or seven years, a better knowledge of the benefits of free weight-training coupled with the well-documented explosion of the personal training industry has helped vault weight-training above the stereotype of being only for serious body-builders and Venice Beach muscle heads.

“It’s amazing what can be undone with just a few years of good publicity and solid research,” said Rojas. “Now we see that strength-training with weights is being embraced by virtually every class, including women, deconditioned folks, the elderly, and an emerging middle-aged population that’s been around fitness most of their lives and understand free weights more.”

Greg Highsmith, senior business director for strength products for Life Fitness, said he couldn’t agree more. “We are slowly transitioning the perception of strength-training from the body-building mentality to what the reality is and what it can do for the appearance and health for anybody,” said Highsmith.

And the change in attitude has never been more evident than it is with women, added Highsmith.

“More women are turning to strength-training because of scientific research they see published in the media,” Highsmith said. “The media is a very powerful force in determining what the trends are, and most of the female role models in the media today strength-



PHOTO COURTESY OF LIFE FITNESS

EQUIPMENT VERSATILITY ARE DRIVING **GROWTH** IN THE STRENGTH-TRAINING CATEGORY.

train to stay in shape. And they're quite public about it."

In fact, a number of manufacturers told us that sales to women last year represented their No. 1 growth category, and that trend looks to hold true again this year.

CLUBS SET PACE FOR HOME USE

Every manufacturer we talked to for this article acknowledged that the club market dictates the direction of the retail market for two reasons: One, more and more retail buyers are acutely aware of club machinery trends and follow those in ordering new products and, two, the majority of club members, while not stuck on brand names, want to buy products at retail that are similar to those they have used in their club.

And therein rests the monumental challenge: Producing a home gym that takes the 20 stations a club user is familiar with—representing, oh, some \$20,000 of technology—and packaging all that into a single \$1,000 to \$2,000 unit that works well and feels smooth.

Demands for smaller footprints, appealing cosmetics and easy-to-use features without the need for gymnastics to move from exercise to exercise add to the engineering challenges as manufacturers seek to apply commercially popular features into products suitable for sale at specialty retail.

- **Less is more** — Highsmith told us that he has heard retailers tell him customers are making buying decisions based on footprint size first, even above features. "One retailer I talked with recently told me they sell one line of gyms strictly because of its size."

Little wonder since we've heard tales of consumers seeking to put home gyms into small walk-in closets and other spaces previously not thought of for workout use. And some folks want the pleasures of home workouts even if they live in tiny apartments.

- **Looks are (almost) everything** — Looking good is more important than one might imagine: "The larger percentage of buyers looking for home gyms are married, and even if the piece will be used primarily by the man, we're finding that it is typically the woman making the ultimate buying decision, thinking about the look and size of the machinery," said Jeff Partrick, CEO of Hoist, speaking from the wisdom of a manufacturer that also owns a chain of eight specialty fitness stores in and around San Diego, Calif.

And if the gym is going to be in a guest room or living room, it'd better look

more attractive than the iron plates and crusty bars of yore—especially if a woman is involved.

- **Easy, please** — More often, though, no matter how good or compact the home gym might be, convenience and ease of use is king when it comes to closing the sale, or ensuring the consumer will actually enjoy the purchase.

"Everything is grab-and-go in some sense, and it goes back to the lazy consumer who wants results, but doesn't want to have to work hard to get them," said Todd Keller, national sales manager for Body-Solid, which also now runs its own retail stores in the Chicago area. "The trick is learning to offer the consumer what they need in a package that they want."

"Most manufacturers, including Body-Solid, are designing home gyms with features that are applicable to real-world movement designed to help you in everyday life," Keller added. "Since most folks don't want to work out more than three times a week, 20 minutes each day, it is also essential that any machine that is offered is easy to use and doesn't require wrestling to make adjustments."

Added Keller: "If a consumer has to wrestle with a product, that is how it ends up in a garage sale."

WHAT'S COMING DOWN

In a world still dominated by cables, pul-

leys, weight stacks and adjustable arms, trying to get any company in this secretive industry to reveal what it will be bringing to market—even in the next month or two—is harder than getting the media relations reps at the White House to provide anything specific about George W. Bush's use of the fitness rooms.

So, in deference to the clear national security concerns over anyone finding out about the new features on a home gym before its slated launch, here is what we not only could piece together but are able to tell you: One thing's for sure, if you want to know what the next new thing is to be, head to the clubs, look at what new motion and movement technology companies just brought out and what is most popular. Then bet your bottom dollar those features will be "detuned" slightly for home use.

Body-Solid did acknowledge that it has focused the majority of its company's R&D resources on home gyms instead of single-station home pieces and, as a result, will debut a whopping five new home gyms this year and another five more next year. Hoist went nuts earlier this year on its kids' circuit and is likely holding on that for a bit. Bodycraft will expand on its version of a cable motion unit with arms that are fully adjustable up and down for versatility. We'd have to shoot you if we told you anymore.

Running the **NUMBERS** Game

MARGINS ARE A GAME

everybody plays. Retailers want more. Consumers want good prices. Suppliers try to keep everybody happy.

How is that possible? It's not, really.

GearTrends can tell you that the average industry margin retailers get when selling a home gym is somewhere between 40 and 50. Usually it's the chains working with exclusive or larger manufacturers that can eke out the higher 50-percent margin. That leaves specialty dealers chasing independent brands that are lesser known, but perhaps offer more features or other customer benefits. Then it's up to the retailer to sell it. Likely not too difficult since consumers don't really know brands anyway.

Of all home gyms sold currently, only 8 percent are sold through specialty retail channels, a percentage most manufacturers we spoke with say they are working hard to change. It is expected that the percentage will trend upward, just like treadmills did a few years ago. Currently, specialty retail captures approximately 20 percent of all treadmill sales.