

THE FITNESS INDUSTRY SPENDS A LOT of effort struggling to convince people to find a crevasse of time to workout. Of course, then cardiovascular equipment manufacturers spend another hunk of time competing to be The Choice for that crevasse. That can be a daunting battle for the makers of all that “other stuff” out there that go head-to-head with the cardiovascular kings of today—treadmills and ellipticals.

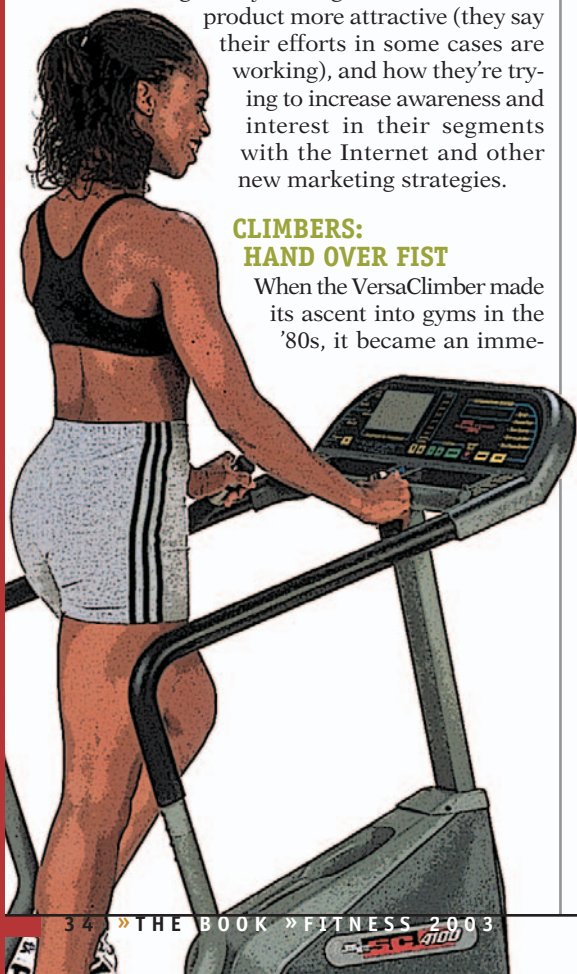
For climbers, steppers, rowing machines and cross-country skiers, the peaks and valleys in sales of yore have turned into an uphill trek. Consider this stat from the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association: Since 1987 treadmills have skyrocketed in use by nearly 900 percent, while the poor little rowing machines have seen their use plummet 51 percent. Ouch.

“People spend more money on fitness videos than on, for example, cross-country skiers,” said Larry Weindruch, spokesman for the National Sporting Goods Association (NSGA).

We’ve taken a look at each of these categories to see how they’re hanging on, what they’re doing to stay in the game and make their product more attractive (they say their efforts in some cases are working), and how they’re trying to increase awareness and interest in their segments with the Internet and other new marketing strategies.

**CLIMBERS:
HAND OVER FIST**

When the VersaClimber made its ascent into gyms in the ‘80s, it became an imme-



Climbers, steppers, cross-country skiers and rowers

» **FIGHT** »

for attention in the cardio world.

in the fray

BY DEBBIE TALANIAN

diate fav of instructors and staff. Good, yes, because what instructors use, others will often take on too. Bad, because the units gained a reputation as being really tough workouts—and rightly so. They were. Heck, that’s why the instructors liked them so much!

Sales and Marketing Manager Brett Collins, who came on board at VersaClimber two years ago, said the product’s intensity was keeping users from coming back, and its reputation as too difficult was keeping newcomers away. So he’s working to convert the image to “current, contemporary—an image of not being so hard you can’t even use it.”

That is going hand-in-hand with new product. In April 2003, the VersaClimber company, Heart Rate Inc. of California (www.versaclimber.com), released the latest version of the climber for club (list \$3,500 to \$4,000) and home use (list \$1,800).

The new models are built to win new recruits—and retain them—with more motivation with messages, audio instructions and interaction, and a workout difficulty that can be modified. For example, the step height will be restricted 10 inches to prevent overstepping and overexerting. In addition, they will follow the lead of displays on other equipment with more feedback—instead of just digital step rate and time readouts—that provides users with heart-rate monitoring and the ability to choose climbs, such as famous mountains. In addition, the company is reaching out to influencers in the fitness industry with education: To re-spark interest, a campaign to educate health-club staff and personal trainers is being developed.

Many climbing consumers are first-time users who’ve heard about the product from a friend. It’s also popular among athletes. Military sales have also spiked in the last year and a half, and the company is aggressively marketing to fire departments. And, get this, consumer sales, Collins said, have started to go up again.

STEEPERS: STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

It wasn’t all that long ago that fitness enthusiasts couldn’t get enough of the StairMaster, the original stairclimber introduced in 1986 whose name became nearly generic for the category. They lined the floors at clubs and companies couldn’t work fast enough to come up with their own versions for both home and commercial use.

But all good things come to an end, with technological advances in treadmills and the elliptical in the ‘90s, putting the stepper on the downhill slide.

“Steppers seem to be on the decline across the board,” said Jay Wright, spokesman for Icon Health & Fitness. Oh, the company still sells a NordicTrack stepper—you almost have to have one in your line still—but it’s far from dominant.

Manufacturers say sales are flat or declining. The NSGA reports a 55.7 percent drop in consumer purchases of steppers and climbers combined between 2000 and 2002.

But not everyone is bailing out: A core group of users remains dedicated to steppers, typically women (about seven of 10 users) who are in pretty good shape, the experts say,

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mostly in their 20s or 30s. Why? The workout isn't easy, and its emphasis on thighs and glutes keep the fitter female segment stepping onward.

Still, it's treading madly to stay afloat with product enhancements. Better programming ability and a reliable heart-rate-monitoring grip are among improvements manufacturers list, along with relocating handrails from the sides to the front of the user—to make it harder or even impossible to wreck your back with the StairMaster “slouch” and to force the user to use the lower body and not the arms.

The Nautilus Group says it does about 15 percent of its home cardio business with the StairMaster, the company it bought in early 2002. Who wouldn't want that name despite sales declines? Adam Hubbard, senior product manager, admitted it's a relatively flat category.

At Life Fitness, a piddling 3 percent to 5 percent of sales come from steppers. Chris Clawson, former vice president of consumer sales and marketing, said buyers for home use tend also to be the ones using them in the gym and are pretty dedicated. In 2002, Life Fitness introduced a new self-powered stepper with independent foot platforms that allows programming on the fly—moving from one program to another without being forced to stop a workout. For Life Fitness, the home-model stair climber has more features than the club model, but Clawson said sales are down for both.

Companies say sales are still steady to certain segments, particularly the military, housing developments, hotels and smaller clubs. That's because they take less floor space than the treadmill and elliptical space hogs.

CROSS-COUNTRY SKIERS: A SLIPPERY SLOPE

The name “NordicTrack” was nearly synonymous with the cross-country ski simulator—those wooden units that had long ski-like boards that slid back and forth (assuming you didn't impale your pet dog and have to stop). But NordicTrack couldn't make it on skiers alone, it seems, even with direct marketing, and the company was bought by Icon in the mid-1990s. Didn't matter that everyone admits it's probably one of the best workouts around, assuming you could figure it out and not look like Goofy trying to ice skate.

So small is the ski segment for Icon that company spokesman Jay Wright wasn't even sure the company still sold one—until GearTrends spotted a machine on the company's website and pointed out to him that it must. Its Classic Pro Skier is \$599, and is the same one you've always known with the wood base and long wood skis. But, Wright said, skiers are “probably a blip on

the radar screen” of sales.

No kidding. In the United States, a 20.6 percent decline in cross-country skier use since 1990 is reported by the SGMA. And, consumers in 1992 spent more than \$411 million on skiers but just \$7.4 million in 2002, according to the NSGA.

Precor for a short time made tracks into cross-country ski training with a home machine introduced in about 1989 that was known as super smooth and fluid. Plus, its skis were stubby so they didn't protrude forward and backward so far. But it saw the end of its season after six years. Ski stimulators are still only for the very dedicated, very coordinated and very brave, the company realized.

“We learned a valuable lesson,” said Jim Birrell, Precor vice president of design and development. “These products didn't really sell well to specialty retailers because they were hard to learn and to use. Once they struggled with it in the store, they decided to buy something else. It just was not a good product for that environment.”

ROWING MACHINES: GENTLY DOWN THE STREAM

Defying statistics that paint a picture of doom-and-gloom—consumer sales of rowing machines dropped 36.4 percent between 2000 and 2002, according to the NSGA—Concept2 has been making rowing machines since 1981. Director of Marketing Bill Patton said use is on the rise, with home users—who don't usually have experience with on-water rowing—accounting for most sales, and international sales leading the way.

Even with a small market, there is competition. United Kingdom-based WaterRower (www.WaterRower.com), with an office in Rhode Island, has been around for 15 years in the consumer market, while The Nautilus Group's Windrigger, manufactured under the Schwinn brand, brings in 5 percent of company sales. It doesn't hurt that prices for home rowers overall are moderate—about \$800 to \$1,100.

Discounting current competitive or recreational on-water rowers, the fitness rower tends to be someone who is very focused in workouts and keyed in on quantitative workout data, looking to track progress over months and years.

“People who use it, use it religiously,” said Adam Hubbard of Nautilus, who described the company's typical rowing equipment consumer as male, 35-45 years old, fit, knowledgeable and a hard-core purist.

That kind of user doesn't need or care for fancy blinking lights and motivational mes-

sages, meaning the category hasn't really done a lot of evolving, launching of new product models or advertising, as other equipment segments have. “These users want a simple, reliable machine,” Hubbard said, and most get into it by customer referrals.

Concept2 (www.concept2.com) has kept sales steady partly with a 3-year-old web-based program that has created a virtual community allowing all those cult rowers around the world to track their distances and compete via the Internet with each other. Since its inception, Patton said, 50,000 people have registered online at its website, with 3.5 billion meters logged by Concept2 rowers in more than 90 countries in the last year.

The impact of a web-based community hasn't bypassed WaterRower, said Kim Dafel, marketing manager. It now has software that allows users to compete with others worldwide and last year introduced WaterCoach (www.watercoach.com) to provide coaching and technique tips. Also coming soon are group rowing classes called WaterCrew—landing soon in New England and West Coast gyms. The program's goal is to introduce more people to rowing, break into the commercial market, and compete not only with treadmills and ellipticals, but also with Concept2.

In contrast to these companies that are keeping the rowing candle lit, Life Fitness discontinued its animated-screen Life Rower two years ago after 14 years when some micro-circuitry it used became unavailable.

“We would have had to re-design the entire product,” said Life's Chris Clawson. “There just wasn't the market to spend those dollars for a category that was so small.”

