



a new



He wasn't trying to create a new strength-training category. Instead, Roy Simonson just wanted to train better so he wouldn't be "torn to shreds," as he called it, by things like snowboarding, bike racing and rock climbing.

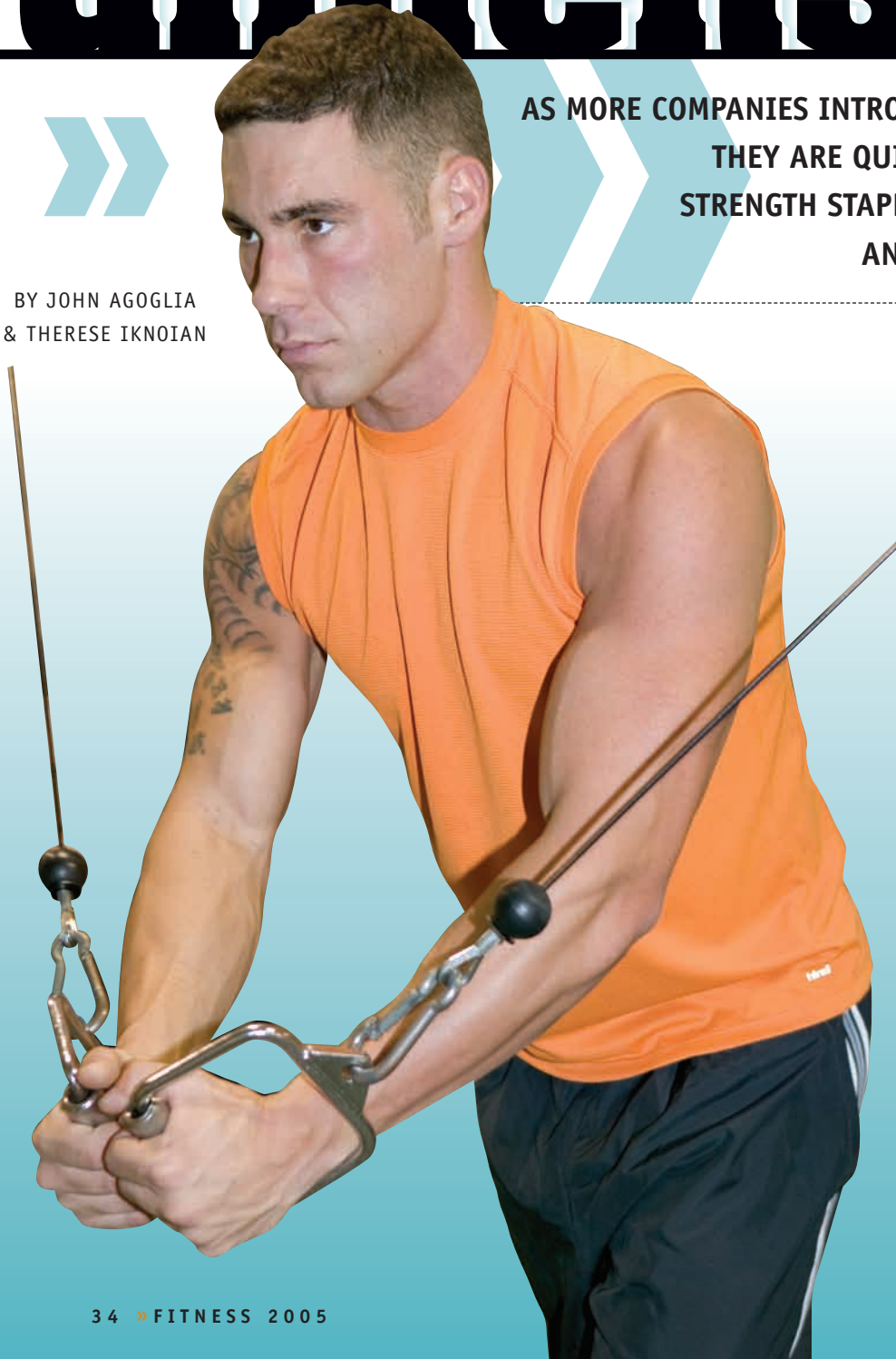
As the creator of Eagle Strength Systems that was bought by Cybex in 1983, he had the expertise to do just that. Let the garage tinkering begin.

"Real-life activities are three-dimensional," he said he thought at the time. "It's up, down, twisting, turning and asymmetrical. So I started thinking about what

dimension

AS MORE COMPANIES INTRODUCE **FUNCTIONAL TRAINERS**, THEY ARE QUICKLY ROUNDING INTO A TRUE STRENGTH STAPLE AND SEEM TO BE ON A FREE AND NATURAL PATH TO SUCCESS.

BY JOHN AGOGLIA & THERESE IKNOIAN



I could use that would help me functionally train for these activities."

Cables caught his eye. Nothing new, really. But then again...

"Cables have been around a long time," he said. "The problem wasn't the cables. It's just that cables can be really versatile, and we'd been neglecting that."

Not more than two years later, he had come up with what he called "free-motion training"—and an entire set of strength machines that used cables and arms that had the versatility to let users mimic daily activities and sports endeavors so they could train functionally. He debuted the line under the company name "GroundZero" at the IHRSA show in March 2000 in a booth surrounded by a big buzz and a chain-link fence that transmitted the subtle message that if you weren't inside, you were definitely an outsider. Simonson held court inside.

"FreeMotion—GroundZero then—really deserves the credit for creating the category," said Steve Rhodes, vice president of sales and marketing for Paramount Fitness. "It took it beyond the traditional pulley system and created what seems like a new category."

The category's leader—and the one piece that most companies have tried to create in their own lines—is what has become known as a "functional trainer." Think of a cable cross machine but one that has the cables thread through arms that move up and down as well as pivot, with handles that can twist and turn, allowing the user to twist and turn any which way for training—

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a cable-cross with free range of movement.

It didn't take long for other companies to note the attraction, and salability, of functional trainers. Only nine months after GroundZero's debut, Icon Fitness snapped up the company as its commercial division. (GroundZero changed its name to FreeMotion Fitness in late 2001 after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.) The companies then that couldn't buy the system worked on finding a better way to make their own.

Today, only five short years later, if a company doesn't have a functional trainer, it is definitely an outsider. Like the StairMaster and the elliptical, this piece has the potential to withstand the test of time and to make the impact necessary to be written into the fitness history books.

"Roy spent nine months in development of the line, working with lots of cable-cross machines," said Patrick Hald, CEO of FreeMotion Fitness, which now has 18 pieces of circuit pieces, functional trainers and columns. "He took those earlier concepts and made it a better package. It took a new functional aspect to training and got it out of the middle of the room in a big jungle gym."

Simonson, who left FreeMotion in March 2005, said traditional machines have three things going for them: "One, they have a fixed path of resistance. Two, they isolate particular muscle groups, and, three, they're highly stabilized. So you're fixed, stabilized and you're isolated," he explained. Functional trainers do just the opposite, he said, freeing you, leaving you unstable, and allowing many of your muscles and joints to work at the same time—like in real life.

The term "functional trainer" is not one, however, that he coined, but rather is one that was created by other manufacturers as they scurried to the drawing tables to figure out how to compete.

CATCHING ON

Part of the success of the equipment has been the rapid acceptance of functional and core training principles by trainers, health clubs and the media. This proliferation of information about the benefits of functional training has helped increase awareness and demand, according to some.

"It seems very quickly that it has become a staple category. It is kind of like the beginning of the elliptical," said Rhodes of Paramount, which recently in-

troduced two functional trainers, including a light commercial and home unit, the FT-150 (list, \$2,800). Both units offer what Rhodes said is an increased range of motion using cable extension arms that offer 130 degrees of vertical adjustment and 105 degrees of horizontal adjustment.

Tom Taylor, president of Connecticut's Advanced Exercise Solutions, which combines retail, personal training and gym facilities, said he sees a lot of attention being paid to the category.

"I'm lucky that I'm in an affluent market with educated and athletic consumers so they know about it," said Taylor, who has the added bonus of being able to train people on them, and then sell the equipment to them.

Despite the growing awareness and popularity of functional trainers, they are so far mostly seen as primarily a commercial product, partly because they are relatively big, somewhat expensive and demand a bit of knowledge to know what to do with them. That image is evolving as more manufacturers make home units and more retailers learn how to sell them.

"There has been a lot of neglect in the home market partly because it is such a technical machine, and there is a learning curve," said Dan Foust, Northeast regional sales manager for True Fitness. "But we all need to remember that people aren't always looking for what is easy; they may be looking for what is best."

True Fitness introduced its 550 HGRAP functional gym with radial pull arms incorporated in a multi-station design with a bench station and shoulder station (list, \$4,900) a little more than two years ago.

Another FreeMotion competitor is now also on the bandwagon. Life Fitness' G5 Cable Motion home gym (list, \$3,000) has had great reviews, even by competitors. Its launch was followed last year with the Parabody CM3 (list, \$1,500). Both units claim virtually unlimited cable exercise variety allowing for exercising in multiple planes, while the G5 has a removable bench allowing for the incorporation of stability balls, freestanding exercises, and even balance and core boards.

Not everyone, though, agrees that the functional category will make a successful transition to the home market.

Strangely, Cybex, the company often credited as the second to the category with its FT 360, which was launched in 2000,

leads the way in skepticism.

"I'm not convinced that functional training is going to be a staple category or a growing one," said Cybex President and CEO John Aglialaro. "While others have developed single-station units, we have kept to the FT 360. The concept works best with personal training, so I'm not sure it is a huge growth category due to the barriers associated with that."

EDUCATE AND THEY WILL COME

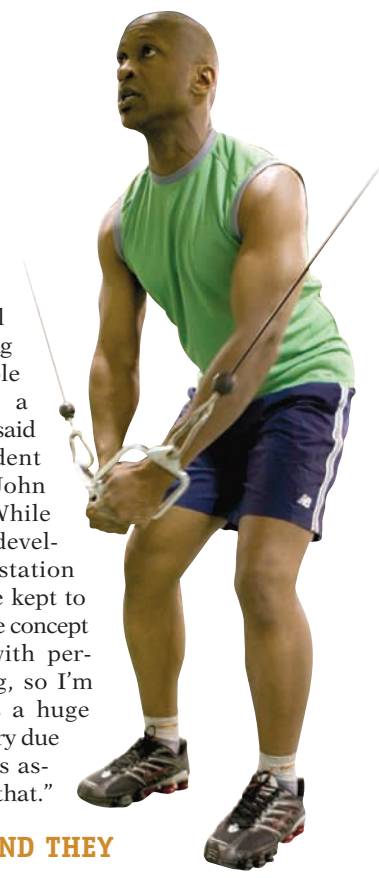
It was that question of growth springing from health clubs that dogged the elliptical for its first few years. That question, though, no longer lingers due mostly to educated consumers and retailers finally being able to explain the benefits and differences of ellipticals and steppers—a common confusion in the machines' early days. Manufacturers and retailers are counting on a similar pattern to help functional trainers make the move to the home.

"Most people still associate strength training with the old Universal machine they had in their high school," Hald said. "This is still something so different for so many people. It truly is an experiential sale that relies on the retailer."

Bob Lachniet, owner of Fitness4Home Superstore in Arizona, has had success selling the Paramount FT-150 home unit and said he expects the same from his recently picked up Cybex line. It doesn't hurt that, like Taylor's Advanced Exercise Solutions, he also has trainers in the store to help educate customers.

"The awareness of the category is pretty high, especially with people who have been in a gym and seen the FreeMotion equipment," Lachniet said. "If we spend 10 or 15 minutes with the person, we can educate them on the benefits. We have the advantage of having experienced trainers on site that are educated themselves. It would be a help for most retailers if these companies did more to educate them as well."

It is still too early to tell if the initial, mostly commercial success and the continuing



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*web extra

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introduction of various functional training pieces by leading manufacturers will spell long-term success for the category. With the right marketing and continued education of retailers and consumers, however, functional trainers may find that truly prominent place in the fitness industry history books.

"This is a strong category that doesn't show signs of being a fad," said FreeMotion's Hald said. "It is a big world out there, and with functional training anything is possible."

Although the man who basically created the functional-training category, Simonson said he doesn't think it will ever overtake traditional strength machines. But it will grow as more people understand how to use such machines.

"We didn't do anything brilliant," said Simonson, who said he will be back in the industry in 2007 once his non-compete with FreeMotion has expired. "We just revisited an old idea ... and we refined it a little bit."

"This is not the Holy Grail of training," he continued. "It's a tool. Just like dumbbells are a tool. It's just a tool that was long neglected."

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: DON'T FORGET THE EXTRAS

One of the key aspects to a truly successful retail operation is adding items and dollars to the sales ticket. Selling functional trainers has been a boon to several retailers that have been able to add up significant dollars through add-on sales.

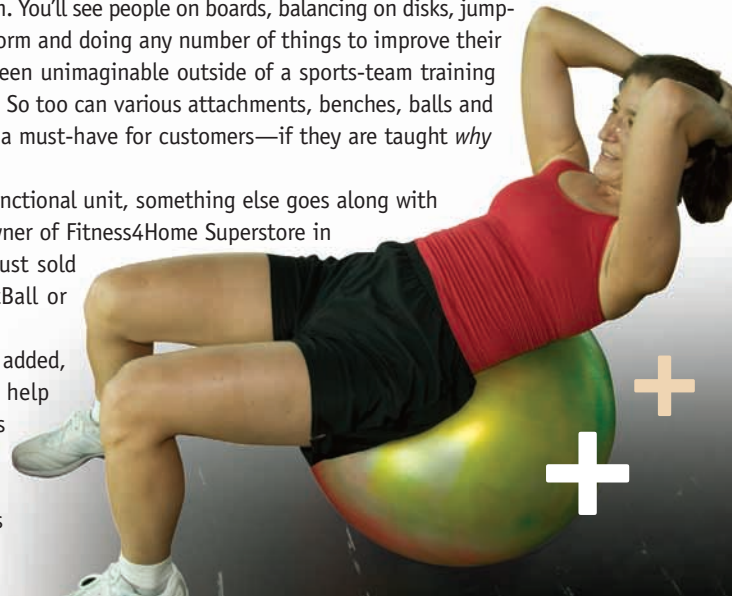
"The category gives you a great opportunity to sell additional items," said Tom Taylor, president of Advanced Exercise Solutions in Connecticut. "It might just be a bench, but it is something."

Often though, those add-on items get a little more exotic than a flat bench. Just look at the floor of any gym. You'll see people on boards, balancing on disks, jumping from platform to platform and doing any number of things to improve their fitness that would have been unimaginable outside of a sports-team training room just a few years ago. So too can various attachments, benches, balls and balance cushions become a must-have for customers—if they are taught *why* as a part of the sale.

"Every time we sell a functional unit, something else goes along with it," said Bob Lachniet, owner of Fitness4Home Superstore in Arizona "We have never just sold one without a bench, FitBall or even a BOSU."

"In the end," Lachniet added, "anything we can do to help boost our sales numbers is a good thing."

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