



NO

ELLIPTICAL SALES CONTINUE TO **AMAZE** RETAILERS AND MANUFACTURERS ALIKE, CREATING A **PHENOMENON** THAT HAS AFFECTED EVERY ASPECT OF THE FITNESS INDUSTRY.

BY JEAN SUFFIN



PASSING FANCY

Without another “new thing,” the elliptical has remained the hottest category of cardiovascular equipment. Fitness retailers in the annual SNEWS® survey continue to name it as the “fastest-growing.” Even after nearly a decade since its introduction! Indeed, it wasn’t a fad, a passing fancy or an oddity, but a wave that swept over the market and has affected every company and even the entire direction of the industry.

The elliptical is now even breathing down the neck of the treadmill, long the most popular piece of cardiovascular equipment. (See the third-annual SNEWS® retailer survey, page 42.)

GO OUT FAST

What gives? It’s not as if the idea of feet moving in an elliptical pattern is new. Check out a runner’s motion. Plus, more than 300 patents relating to elliptical-like trainers are flapping around the archives of the U.S. Patent & Trademark Office, going back decades before the Precor trainer existed. But none had brought it to market as effectively as the one dreamed up by inventor Larry Miller and brought to life by Precor in its EFX 544 launched in 1995. That first elliptical whipped attendees at the Club Industry show into a frenzy and became the must-have for clubs, other manufacturers and, eventually over the years, retailers and therefore the consumer. Today, Precor has five retail models (lists \$2,600 to \$4,200) and five commercial models.

“What the elliptical offers that the treadmill doesn’t is variety,” said Terry Woods, director of product development for Star Trac, which in spring

2005 launched its two redesigned commercial ellipticals (lists \$5,500 and \$6,000), with a trick feature that allows users to punch a button to disengage upper-body arms. “The variety can be in stride length, stride pattern and upper-body availability, as well as the programming, heart rate and feedback that treadmills already have.”

The elliptical’s versatility as a low-impact, non-jarring workout makes it the obvious choice for diverse populations and could explain why it hasn’t faded in popularity. It

feels natural—like walking or running. It can be used for high-power athletic training, by senior citizens, by the deconditioned, and for rehabilitation from injury.

Here’s the clincher: It’s often perceived as easier than its mates in the cardiovascular equipment arena. And we all know consumers want to get something for nothing. “Ellipticals provide a more dynamic

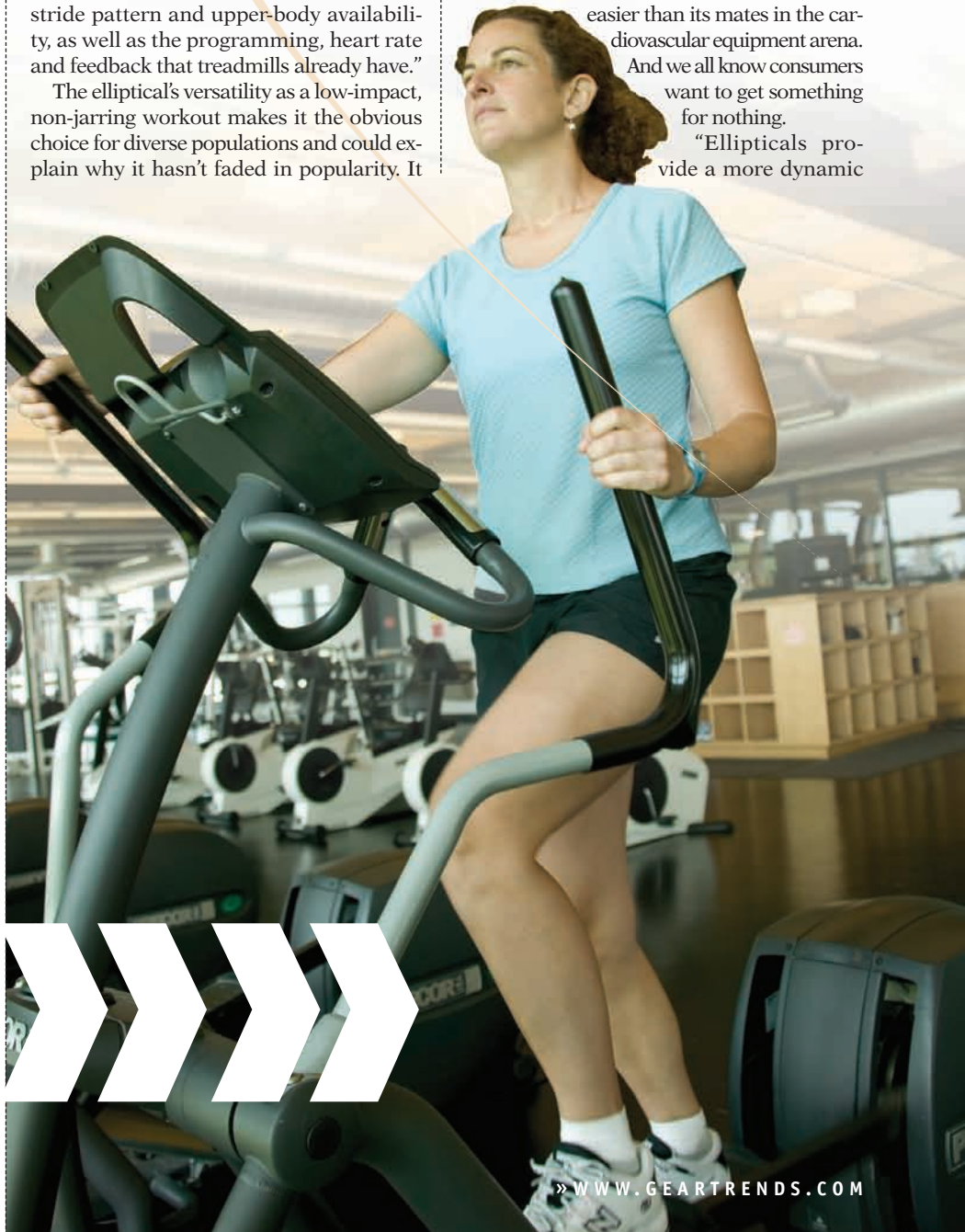


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exercise than a treadmill or bike. More total body benefit. Physiologically, it generates the same heart rate and metabolic rate as a treadmill, but the perceived exertion is less," said Scott Logan, director of marketing for SportsArt Fitness.

PICKING IT UP ON THE BACK STRETCH

The elliptical has come a long way from its first days, with Precor continuing to push the development envelope, as well as Nautilus, Octane, SportsArt, Star Trac, Vision, Fitness Master, Bladez, Bodycraft and about 30 others taking up the task and providing competition. Seems everybody wants in on the still "fastest-growing" elliptical bandwagon, including newcomer Lifecore, which will show its product for the first time at the Health & Fitness Business show in August.

These days, it's not just the ellipsis pattern alone that will make users happy, manufacturers told GearTrends®. The bar has been raised with manufacturers pointing out comfort as key, including biomechanical comfort and safety as well as simple creature comforts (e.g. water bottle holders and cushy gel grips). In addition, being able to vary the motion in some way—upper body options, reverse or forward, program choices, incline and stride length adjustment—helps individualize a workout and has spun its way onto engineer's drawing boards. Plus, what's a fun and comfy ellipsis pattern to you ain't the cat's meow to another, leaving room for yet another place for manufacturers to personalize equipment.

"Everyone is looking for the 'perfect' motion, but due to the fact that this is such a subjective feature, I am afraid there is no such thing," said Alan Gore, co-founder of Bodycraft, which in early 2005 released its first ellipticals, the ECT 2100 (list \$1,000) and ECT 2500 (\$1,300). "Our battle cry was, 'We want a good motion, not perfect, just good.'"

Then there's all that other stuff that differentiates ellipticals: Front drive or rear drive, upper body or not, programs and console differences, size and spacing of foot platforms, and entertainment options. These features leave room for yet more tweaking by different manufacturers that will tell you mine is better than yours. But, realize now, compared to something like a treadmill, there is so much personal preference in an elliptical that what one user loves to death may be the death march for another.

KING ELLIPSIS

In case you didn't know, the name elliptical comes from the "ellipse" pattern the feet make if you traced the movement from

the side. It's sort of a squished egg shape. How squished depends on the manufacturer. Typically, the shorter the machine, the higher and rounder the ellipsis, the more vertical the motion, and the "bouncier" the experience. Conversely, the longer the machine, the longer and flatter the ellipsis, and the less bouncy the ride.

"The right amount of ellipse will create a smooth feel. A shorter ellipse can become more choppy and less comfortable," said Chris Cox, director of product and marketing at Vision. The company now has four retail models (lists \$1,200 to \$2,000). He said that Vision's customer research has allowed the company to design a machine that fits different body styles and preferences.

Founder of Lifecore Fitness, Roger Bates, disagreed that short must mean choppy. Lifecore will debut four ellipticals to the industry in Denver, two of which are already being sold (lists \$600 to \$1,100). He said its ellipticals, even though they are smaller and more compact with a rear drive, have an elliptical motion that doesn't bounce you up and down. "If a person's head starts bobbing up and down, it's not a true elliptical motion and it puts pressure on the knees," he said.

From the start, Precor has laid claim to a smooth ride based on its longer and flatter ellipse on its trainers using its patented CrossRamp that allows incline and helps users to choose more of a bouncy hike or a smoother run. Star Trac's new models have a shorter and taller ellipse, partly because that company's research showed users liked the "fun" supplied by a bit of a bounce.

Even with a never-ending debate over bounce or not, the future seems to point toward flat and smooth, according to several manufacturers with which GearTrends® spoke, including Vision, New Balance (by Fitness Quest) and Bodycraft. Still, Life Fitness reintroduced a commercial 91x model at the IHRSA show (list \$4,300) with a stride that was shorter and bouncier based on the popularity of its retail X9i model (\$4,200).

Patrick Warner, senior vice president of product development for Nautilus, said that all in all, an elliptical feels natural: "Everyone knows how to walk. People know how to move their feet back and forth."

NO, COMFORT IS KING

When Fitness Quest licensed the New Balance name (see SNEWS® story, July 8, 2004,

: ELLIPTICAL WANNA-BE?

With the popularity of the walking- or running-like elliptical movement, it's a given that other companies will try their hands at other biomechanically similar alternatives. Look at the Cybex Arc Trainer, the Nautilus TreadClimber and the SportsArt XTrainer as three:

» **Cybex launched the Arc Trainer in gyms in 2002**, with a total-body version launched in 2004. With no competitors, it's been a screaming success, and Cybex is planning to launch a retail version. Like the elliptical, the Arc is a low-impact workout, but instead of an ellipse, the shape of the movement is—you got it—an arc, looking and feeling something like a mix of stepper, elliptical and Gazelle glider.

» **Nautilus launched its commercial version of the TreadClimber in January 2005**, partly to ignite sales of the retail version, which debuted in March 2003. The TreadClimber is a walking machine with a deck and belt that are split lengthwise and move separately like pedals, which the company calls treadles. The movement feels more like hiking uphill than just walking.

» **SportsArt Fitness in October 2004 introduced what it called an XTrainer** that resembles a recumbent bicycle with arms but feels more like a recumbent elliptical. You push and pull the independent arms for an upper-body workout while pedaling. Resistance can be adjusted independently of the pedals, and you can move your arms at a different rhythm than your feet. Although a commercial product, its \$5,500 list will allow it be sold for home use.





at www.snewsnet.com), it first spent two years doing consumer research about brand perception. After going through a lot of possible names to license, New Balance was selected since it meant comfort to most consumers. “Part of the reason for the New Balance choice was based on the quality of the product and its reputation as having a performance feel designed with comfort. That’s what we wanted to convey,” said Joel Scalzo, national sales manager for Fitness Quest’s specialty fitness division. It debuted at the 2004 Health & Fitness Business show with four ellipticals and has since added one more, bringing the total to five, ranging in price from \$650 to \$1,650. Features include cushioned foot platforms and cushy gel grips.

A common thread over the years in discussing comfort was the spacing between the foot platforms, which originally on many trainers were far enough apart that the width could cause back and hip pain in smaller people with narrower hips. (If someone is forced to stand wider than biomechanically comfortable, muscles that shouldn’t be tightening up tend to tense in the hips, glutes and back and that can cause strain.) It didn’t take long for most manufacturers to figure out how to get mechanics and drives out of the space between the pedals to allow platforms to get closer. And with wider platforms, even bigger people can still be comfortable. Two inches or so between platforms will fit most, as companies like Octane have managed to develop.

“Companies are working on that. The industry has to go through a learning curve,” said Ken Stearns, fitness equipment inventor, licensor and holder of more than 70 patents.

Like with Goldilocks

and the Three Bears, pedals can be too short or too wide. (We know, Goldilocks was thinking porridge and beds and not pedals, but go with us on this one, OK?) The idea is to find the perfect size so that users with any size foot and any type of stance can find the most comfortable distance from the console. “The goal is to improve the experience of the user on our products,” said Dan Wille, Life Fitness’ director of consumer cardio product management. “It gets down to the size of the foot pedal, so you can put your feet in different positions to get a different workout.”

And manufacturers are finding ways to tweak foot platforms even more. Nautilus, for example, has the E916 (list \$5,650) with pivoting bases on each platform so a user’s ankles move naturally, flexing and extending as if he or she were running or walking. And Bodycraft has designed its pedals to adjust forward or backward to allow the user to find the most comfortable position to avoid any foot numbness.

“You need to allow the user to change variables such as the length of stride, etc.” said Stearns. “All these things are going to continue to contribute to the growth of the category.”

SUPER STRIDE ME

Since people come in all shapes and sizes, and companies want to make sure they are all comfortable on the same machine, the adjustable stride was born. SportsArt Fitness was the first to introduce this feature on its 805 (list \$2,900) in August 2000, which has buttons to allow a user to electronically adjust the stride from 17 inches to 26 inches. Since then, it’s added the 807 (list \$3,200) and the 803 with manual adjustment from 18 inches to 26 inches (list \$2,300).

Next up came machines that allow users to adjust their stride length by simply striding out harder or easier, as on the Nautilus models with the so-called My Stride

technology. Stride out more, like running, and the length of stride the machine allows gets longer. Slow down, as if you’re walking, and the platforms accommodate a shorter distance. That’s now available on the EV 7.16 Pro Series Elliptical (list \$3,200).

“Everyone is going after adjustable stride because customers want it,” said Tim Porth, co-founder of 4-year-old Octane. In fact, Octane introduced its Smart-Stride feature in late 2004, in which the machines sense the speed and pressure users are applying and either lengthens or shortens the stride for them (Q45 and Q45e, \$3,200 and \$3,600, respectively).

Well, maybe not everybody wants adjustable stride. Companies that don’t have an adjustable stride—such as Precor, Vision, Star Trac and New Balance—said their equipment accommodates all size users because of features like larger foot platforms.

Two other adjustability tweaks by companies: Bodycraft’s foot platforms can adjust forward or backward to allow users to create their preferred ellipsis shape. And Star Trac’s SelectFit feature lets users push or pull more on its upper-body arms for varied upper-body workouts.

ALL THAT OTHER JAZZ

Shape of ellipsis, comfort and adjustability are the three largest sources of debate. But there are other major differences to consider:

- » **Front versus rear drive:** A rear drive tends to make for a longer and bulkier machine. And despite talk that a front drive means a bouncier ellipsis pattern, it may not be true. It just so happens that a front-drive machine is often built shorter to be less of a space hog in homes. But not always. Some of the newer rear-drive models like those from Lifecore and Bodycraft are built with smaller footprints. Then there are the front-drive models, such as Octane’s, that are up to 16 inches shorter than some rear-drive models. Also, rear-drive aficionados will argue that the unfettered pedal movement hanging out the back can be a danger to pets and little kids who may not expect the reach to be as long, and front-drive suppliers will say having all the mechanics upfront will keep little hands and wet noses in view. Some companies, such as Horizon and Vision Fitness, make folding versions (of course, with front drives!).
- » **Upper-body arms:** Most will say that an el-

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*** web extra**

To read additional material on the elliptical market, an added benefit for GearTrends® magazine readers, go to www.geartrends.com/extras.

liptical these days must have upper-body arms to sell. Of course, look around a lot of clubs and many users just let them swing around beside them. We bet the same thing happens at home, but, of course, we didn't prowl our neighborhoods looking in windows. Precor proudly unveiled its first with upper-body *and* CrossRamp at the IHRSA show in March 2005. But choice is still a big deal: About two and a half years ago, Spirit Fitness tried a model that had arms you could take off. But it was just too much to deal with and was discontinued. As of this writing, Star Trac is the only one with a feature that allows a user to comfortably say "yea" or "nay" to upper body arms by simply punching a button to disengage them. Octane's Porth said his company is talking about adding the ability to remove the upper arms altogether on one of its future models.

» **Programs and feedback:** For a long time, the challenge was to keep price down, so programs and consoles weren't too fancy, leaving ellipticals a bit archaic in their offerings. But as the cost of electronics

has plummeted, so has the influx of programs and feedback increased. Heart-rate monitoring is a given these days. Vision Fitness has gone with programming that coaches users through anaerobic sprints that its designer, Phil Campbell, said works better for weight loss than steady workouts.

"The future of ellipticals involves more feedback in programming," said Scalzo of New Balance. "Elliptical users come from two places, the gym or they are athletes who are no longer able to run. Both are more serious fitness enthusiasts, and they're looking for feedback and entertainment."

Added Woods of Star Trac, "We are continually trying to find a way to make users feel smart."

HERE TO STAY

A fad therefore it isn't.

"Treadmills will be a mainstay no matter what, but ellipticals will give them a run for their money," said Porth of Octane. Already the run has started: In the 2003 SNEWS® Retailer Survey, 79 percent of responding retailers said treadmills were the overall fastest-growing

product category, while 21 percent said it was ellipticals. By the 2004 survey, only 60 percent cited treadmills as the fastest-growing, while ellipticals had moved up with 38 percent of respondents naming it as the fastest-growing. Ellipticals increased the gap even more in the current survey (see page 42 for details).

With ellipticals now nipping at treadmills' heels, what's next for the elliptical market to keep its popularity climbing? The industry can't keep relying on more creature comforts, a water bottle holder, electronic plug-ins, and a few console tweaks or programs. We already have the low-cost category covered. Some name even more programming, more advanced infotainment, more attractive consoles and, yes, the search for the elusive ideal ellipse.

"With this variety, I see companies continuing to strive to find the 'perfect' motion, and they will continue to spend development dollars in this area," said Woods from Star Trac. "I believe the elliptical is here to stay and will threaten the treadmill retail market in about five years." 📍

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