



T A K E T H E

# A-TRAIN

Will the new breed of *half-elliptical/half-hiker* displace the industry's belle of the ball, the elliptical, as its movement continues to evolve?

All these new elliptical/stepper/hiker/climbing-like cardiovascular pieces that are just starting to pop up at fitness trade shows, are they really the Next New Thing of fitness? Could be. Everyone has said they want, need or even crave another breakthrough wowie-zowie piece, a piece that will create a buzz to bolster sales by exciting clubs to replace equipment and by tweaking consumers to run to the store to check it out and lay down their money.

Problem is, despite claims of exponential fitness gains and safer movements, no one knows what really to call these ... these ... elliptical/stepper/hiker/climbing-like ... things. We had the Lifecycle. We had the stepper (aka StairMaster). We had the elliptical. And that makes you wonder: Can something really be a Next New Thing if we can't settle on an easy, instantly-understandable, and sub-15-letter name for the category that rolls off the tongue with a little more panache than "Elliptical Alternative That Sometimes Is Still An Elliptical But Sometimes Isn't Even Though It Sort of Feels Like It Is?"

"We've struggled with the name of the category," admitted consulting Precor product manager Susan Bell.

"We call it non-impact, but weight-bearing," said Johnson Health Tech NA head Nathan Pyles, noting begrudgingly that ellipticals could be defined the same way.

Categorizing a new group of products that are somewhat different from one another—variously resembling ellipticals, steppers, climbers

and combinations thereof, with some using a circular, ellipse-like pattern and a few sticking to a linear gait—is inherently difficult. But all of them at least seem to have a few common themes: no-impact, ascending feel, varied stride lengths, ability to individualize the movement, and a weight-bearing and vertical user. Indeed, that's all very much like the standard elliptical with two key differences: the user's ability to lift his or her knees in a gait that resembles climbing, and to vary the movement as needed or preferred.

It's not as if folks have said they feel a pressure to stray from the popular ellipticals that sell well; they just want to come up with alternatives that build on that—alternatives that offer more variety to users

BY THERESE IKNOIAN

and perhaps are safer biomechanically. GearTrends® has opted to call these new machines Alternative Trainers, a.k.a. A-Trainers (You can choose what your "A" stands for!). These A-Trainers could also appeal to those who have resisted buying an elliptical to date, want to up the intensity (like hardcore athletes or gritty fitness enthusiasts), prefer to avoid knee strain (think aging baby boomers), or those who just want to replace their old elliptical with a newer, more exciting version.

Of course, there are some who would argue that these really aren't a new product segment, but could simply be viewed as moving to the next square on the game board of elliptical development.

"Is it a new category or the next step in an evolution?" asked Norm Morrison of Gym Source. He calls these "linear gait simulators," albeit ones that feel like going up stairs. "A lot of people are trying to catch the lightning bug in the bottle again."



## SHOW ME THE BEEF

Whether or not these machines represent a new category, they serve a common purpose.

"We're all trying to accomplish the same thing—intensity without impact," Pyles said.

So what does a retailer, buyer, salesperson or even the consumer need to know about how the manufacturers such as Precor, Matrix, Life Fitness and Lamar Fitness differ in accomplishing that?

"Non-impact" has been a catchword in the exercise world ever since all that jumping and pounding of aerobic years past caused bum knees, thrown backs and whacked-out hips. But, until now, much of the equipment that eliminated impact also eliminated intensity for the advanced or devout exerciser, or just wasn't as comfortable for the beginning or less-devoted exercisers. Claims of huge calorie burns are often unfounded since, no matter how you slice it, exercisers will use more calories if they have to keep themselves upright using muscles, like on a treadmill.

But these still up the ante of intensity a bit, and that translates into calories used.

So it's that variable of a knee-lifting motion caused by an incline that mostly sets apart these A-Trainers and allows more intensity. Life Fitness' Summit Trainer has a fixed 31-degree incline angle, while the Precor Adaptive Motion Trainer "adapts," per its name, to any incline the user chooses, from zero degrees on up. The Cybex Arc Trainer goes from 12 degrees to 34.5 degrees, and the Matrix Ascent Trainer is 12.5 degrees to 27 degrees, while the Lamar Hiker is 4 degrees to 24 degrees. The bigger the degree that is possible, the more the knee will lift and the more it will feel at some point in the stride like a hike.

In addition, these trainers mostly allow users to define the motion they want at any particular moment in a workout, with the ability to change on-the-fly simply with a different push of the arms or feet, different speed of foot turnover, or a different setting with a button-push. For example, Precor's AMT has a wide variation in stride length, from in-place stepping to walking to casual jogging to fully extended running motion that can take a user from zero inches to 27 inches. Compare that to the Life Fitness machine, which maxes out at 26 inches from the possibility of a shuffling zero. The Lamar Hiker's stride length can grow from about 16 inches to 21 inches, while Matrix's piece extends from 21 inches to 24 inches, and the Cybex is fixed at 24 inches.

## NOT REALLY THE FIRST

Of course, if you really look hard, these A-Trainers aren't the first of their ilk, but in the past folks didn't perceive incline ellipticals as anything but an elliptical with a twist. Ellipticals that had an incline ability, such as the Precor Ramp, were the first to add one possible definition of the "A" (ascending) to training, albeit still using that circular foot motion aka

ellipse. And other ellipticals are joining that herd, too, such as ones from Diamondback, Matrix Fitness and Vision Fitness, with more companies ready to take that leap. All basically baby siblings of the A-Trainers, ellipticals with incline still do most of what the A-Trainers do but for less money and less space.

"The big question is, how do we stop the boredom, keep 'em engaged? The answer is, more variety. People are looking to get more from ellipticals, to make a significant move up to something with more variations," said Chris Cox, Vision's director of new product development. "The fact that we can now offer programs with changing inclines and changing stride length goes a long way to preventing boredom."

Ah, but shuffle through the pages of alternative equipment and we discover this current crop still doesn't include even the first, true-blue A-Trainer. Although introduced in 2002, or seven years after the first elliptical by Precor, the Cybex Arc Trainer can stand up and take a bow for that honor. Until now, it was in a category all by itself, with literally no competitors. Its movement, if viewed from the side, is not an ellipse but rather an arc, i.e. a large and shallow bowl.

"We wanted to improve on the elliptical," said Ray Giannelli, senior vice president of research and development for Cybex who conceptualized and designed the Arc Trainer. "When I first got on an elliptical, I thought, 'This is neat.'" But Giannelli said he soon realized he could not work out at a high intensity without hurting his knees.

"The movement of the elliptical is biomechanically poor," Giannelli said. "Your knee goes in front of your toe. This is unnatural. It isn't how you run. Although not a lot of injuries are linked to ellipticals, the incidence increases for high-performance people to work out at high resistance. That's because knee-ahead-of-the-toe movement places too much stress on the knee."

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, they say. If that's the case, Cybex should be swooning. Even CEO John Aglialoro, in a first-quarter earnings call

PRODUCT PHOTO COURTESY OF LIFE FITNESS





with analysts on April 26, 2007, pointed out this new array of things that had appeared all at once at the club-oriented IHRSA trade show just a month earlier.

"I noted a few of our competitors had a 'something' ... using the word 'trainer.' One looks a lot like the Arc," Agliatoro noted in his typical no-nonsense style. "Where have all the ellipticals gone? The name 'trainer' means something now."

Cybox can in fact only hope the market is expanding. Previously, the company dominated a teeny market, screaming for attention like a shipwrecked sailor all alone on a tiny island. Now, it has competition. Some have hypothesized these new trainers could be an "Arc Trainer Killer" (or even a "Ramp Killer," referring to Precor's incline elliptical). But one could look at this evolution two ways:

- » As a good thing for the industry since there will be a broader buzz about a budding category with a variety of choices, which in the end could create more sales for everybody, including Cybox.
- » As in-your-face competition for Cybox, which has been slowly taking sales from ellipticals, resulting in a battle that could leave winners and losers.

As sales of ellipticals started to slip when the Arc Trainer gained traction, why then did it take four to five years for somebody else to get into this arena? It only took about four months for another company to crank out an elliptical after Precor introduced that last New Thing, and now everybody has one. Think patents. Turns out Cybox holds its patent in-house with no reason to license rights to anybody else. That would be stupid, yes? But most elliptical patents exist in the hands of independent inventors, who make their livelihood by selling license rights. Ergo, ellipticals popped up all over.

Even without access to a patent to license, other manufacturers at first saw the Arc Trainer as different enough that it wouldn't affect their sales so it was mostly ignored. But it did indeed take a bite out of other companies' sales because clubs started replacing a few ellipticals with a few Arc Trainers. Not treadmills. Not bikes. They have different motions and a different user draw. Rather, ellipticals were replaced. And that smacked the suppliers where it really hurts—the bottom line.

"They didn't see it as a New Thing to copy," Morrison of Gym Source noted, "but

merely a variation in the category they were already in.

"Then," he added, "it started affecting sales."

So far that's been limited to clubs, but the Arc Trainer's smaller home-model was just introduced in 2006 and began shipping in earnest in early 2007—after the company ironed out a few glitches. So Cybox is again leading the way, this time into the retail arena where it could also steal sales from other companies. Cybox marketing manager Heather Corbitt said that Agliatoro had staked out 2006 as "our year for going consumer" which she said may give the company a leg up on some of the others, like Precor and Matrix's Johnson Health Tech siblings, which she said won't likely have home versions ready for at least a year. GearTrends® will lay money the others will try to hurry their way to the retail market, perhaps not taking as long as Cybox did to down-size for home equipment retailers, who will likely be chomping at the bit for a New Thing to create excitement among consumers.

### DON'T FORGET ME!

None of this is to say there is anything so terribly wrong with the tried-and-true elliptical. After a dozen years, they are still selling strongly with no break in innovations in the category. For example, the center-drive models (True, Quantum and Keys, so far) aren't as hulking as many ellipticals, let alone as humongo as the current batch of A-Trainers, and they take a smaller footprint, meaning they are less intimidating and more accommodating to the home user.

So the elliptical category is still more than hot. After nearly 13 years of growth and refinement, the irrepressible Bar Mitzvah Boy of the fitness world has reached a milestone: It has become a man. In fact, it is now THE man. The 2006 SNEWS® Fitness Retailer Survey showed that, for the first time, the elliptical was outselling the former 800-pound gorilla of fitness, the treadmill, which is still overall doing just fine, thank you. Treads have not slumped. It's just that the relentless elliptical just keeps on growing—making it a 900-pound gorilla.

In fact, since SGMA first started tracking sales of ellipticals in 2001, sales (in wholesale dollars) have increased about 20 percent each year, reaching \$201 million in 2005. Treadmills still outsell them, having reached \$1.2 billion in wholesale dollars for 2005.

But elliptical sales have climbed steadily and evenly since they entered the market, while treadmill dollars rose only 7 percent from 2001 to 2002 and 8 percent from 2004 to 2005. What was affected were sales of steppers, which revolutionized the fitness market prior to ellipticals. Steppers kept pace with ellipticals from 2001 to 2002, with wholesale dollars for steppers increasing 31 percent. But since then, steppers have ... well ... lost a step as ellipticals picked up the pace. From 2002 to 2003, stepping machines increased 18 percent, and then rose 11 percent the next year. But from 2004 to 2005, wholesale dollars for stepping machines dropped 13 percent.

### ALL IN STRIDE

Will the A-Trainers hit their stride and get people excited without cannibalizing elliptical sales? GearTrends® thinks there is room for everybody—at least for awhile—just as there is room for so many ellipticals since everybody has a different opinion about what they need and what feels good.

"The evidence with aging exercisers is that their bodies are pretty beaten up from running, the pounding of old-school aerobic exercise, and also exercising incorrectly for decades," said fitness consultant Gregory Florez. "This population will chase the fountain of youth for the rest of their lives, and so will embrace new forms of exercise that are easier on their joints and, just as importantly, give them more bang for their buck. The new wave of cross-trainers holds the promise of solving both problems."

At the same time, people won't buy both since the movement is so similar (as they might invest in both an elliptical and a treadmill or a bike), not to mention the gobs of floor space they devour. Think of car dealers: They carry vans, SUVs and crossover sport wagons. You might replace a van with an SUV, or an SUV with a crossover, but you generally only have one per family, since they serve the same function. Same with fitness sales: A couple coming into a retail store might settle on the one piece that pleases the greatest number of users in a household. Cox of Vision said he agreed: "It's not a new category unless the consumer will buy two things—an elliptical and an elliptical variation. But they are too close. The consumer won't buy both."

Some industry insiders note that since the evolution has now started to simmer again, it won't be long until it hits a rolling boil. There are a number of companies GearTrends® has spoken with that have yet another evolution in A-Trainers in the tinker hush-hush stage slated to come out



**WEB EXTRA!** To read more about the A-Trainer cardio equipment now available from manufacturers, as well as a short review of a few research studies done on some in the group—all an added benefit for SNEWS® subscribers—go to [www.geartrends.com/extras](http://www.geartrends.com/extras).

later this year or in the next couple of years. These could involve lateral motion or instability in a user stance to up muscle use and calories, different gait patterns that are not circular or linear or arcuate, and could even be totally free-form in movement. One harbinger of things to come could be seen in Technogym's commercial piece, the Wave lateral trainer, introduced last year and still being promoted heavily by Italy-based Technogym.

"The Arc did break the stranglehold of the machines with a circular ellipse pattern," Morrison of Gym Source said. "Now, the motions are created by pedals and pendulums and flywheels, but they'll get away from that.

"You're going to see a time down the road where your motion is body-mapped through the machine, and the machine will simply replicate that motion," Morrison forecast. "Stride width, stride length,

stride height, even idiosyncratic and personal injury-related nuances will be accommodated for."

And, naturally, as the category expands—or the evolution continues, depending on your point of view—companies will see the opportunities for both club and retail markets. Not only will they sell more product to the same customers, but also sell newer, different-



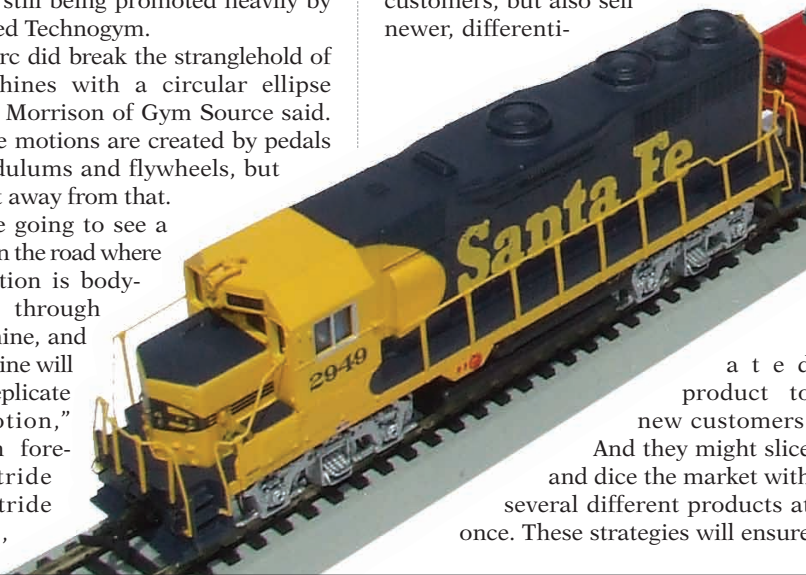
that no potential customer will leave a store without buying one of those ... um ... elliptical/stepper/hiker/climbing-like ... things. In other words, without taking the A-Train.

Duke Ellington could have been singing to the fitness industry in his 1940s jazz hit, "Take the A Train": "Hurry, get on, now, it's coming."

» Go to [www.geartrends.com/magazines](http://www.geartrends.com/magazines) to download extra copies of this magazine.

» Additional research provided by Roy Wallack.

PRODUCT PHOTO COURTESY OF CYBEX



ated product to new customers. And they might slice and dice the market with several different products at once. These strategies will ensure



If you're serious about quality and dependability, reach for an original Nalgene. You'll fall in love with our tasteproof, odorproof material, but it's our leakproof, shatterproof guarantee that will keep you loyal. After subjecting our containers to extreme temperatures and treacherous conditions for more than 50 years, the world's top adventurers continue to ask for us by name. So pick up a Nalgene and feel for yourself the quality that can only come from superior engineering and manufacturing. There is a difference and we've bottled it.

**GENUINE NALGENE.**  
ASK FOR IT BY NAME.



MADE IN USA

[www.nalgene-outdoor.com](http://www.nalgene-outdoor.com)