



i want to ride my » »



# bike



BY JULIE KING

**r**emember the exhilaration of biking outdoors as a kid? The wind in your face, the bugs in your teeth, and the passion to just get there fast. Even when there really was no THERE there, bikes embodied thrills and independence—way before any of us were preoccupied with target heart rates or fat-burning.

It's no real surprise then that the bikes we adored as kids evolved as the first piece of cardiovascular training equipment in the 1960s with the debut of Schwinn's stationary upright bike and the Lifecycle. Reigning as king before the advent of treadmills, stairclimbers, skiers, rowers and ellipticals, stationary cycling was the single most popular fitness activity until the mid-1990s, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association (SGMA).

But, as other equipment was created, bikes began to take a back seat—much like our bikes as kids that began to find a dusty home in the garage when we learned to drive or were otherwise too cool to bike. Stationary bikes became more like neglected princes, overshadowed by the dominant treadmill, the sexy elliptical and the lure of shiny weights. Ah, but don't be fooled—like your childhood's steadfast steed, they still command enough interest to be mainstays on every health club and specialty fitness retailer floor.

"Bikes have been around for 75 years, and they won't drop off like climbers and rowers partly because actual cycling still is a popular outdoor activity," said Brian Bumpers, president of specialty retailer Fitness Master in Mobile, Ala. "No one is saying that bikes aren't effective anymore; they just aren't as popular."

Despite peaks and valleys, the stationary bike is solidly established, and although it may never achieve its glory days

of yore, it's definitely not skidding into the ditches either. And a growing number of manufacturers are again turning their attention to the neglected stepchildren to spiff them up and to add new features and improve fit to brighten eyes again.

## THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Today's stationary bikes—upright, recumbent, dual-action, magnetic, air-powered or electric—and indoor group cycling (*for more on group cycling, see "Packing the Peloton," page 18*)—all offer unarguable benefits such as a nonexistent learning curve, a seated position so virtually anyone can use them, space efficiency and value. Plus, there's the ability while pedaling to read, to watch TV or even to use a laptop (yes, sigh, some do). Despite still slowly spinning along, bikes suffer from an image that says ho-hum, been-there-done-that.

Although statistics vary, most bear out the rise and fall, and subsequent steadying of stationary bike usage and sales since 1987. Over the past 16 years, SGMA cites an all-time high of 39.8 million stationary bike users in 1990, a low of 28.7 million in 2001, and a gradual rise back to 31 million in 2003. Since 1998, upright bike riders declined 18 percent from 20.7 million to 17.5 million in 2003; and simultaneously, recumbent bike exercisers jumped 57 percent from 6.8 million to 10.7 million. Re-

Photos Courtesy of True Fitness and Life Fitness.

## “ NO ONE IS SAYING THAT BIKES AREN'T EFFECTIVE ANYMORE; THEY JUST AREN'T AS POPULAR. ”

—Brian Bumpers, owner, Fitness Master

tailers and manufacturers report that recumbents outsell uprights today by as much as 4-to-1 in the United States, although uprights are the most popular outside North America where space can be an overriding concern.

Purchases of home stationary bikes peaked at 3.1 million units in 1988 and 1989, plummeted to a low of 800,000 in 1996, and then climbed again to 1.5 million in 2002, according to the National Sporting Goods Association (NSGA). In health clubs, the club association IHRSA reported stationary bike users grew 78 percent from 4.5 million in 1987 to 8 million in 2002, with the majority of this increase occurring between 1987 and 1998.

“We grew up with bikes, and they always will be a staple due to their broad appeal and ease of use,” said Dan Wille, director of consumer cardiovascular product development at Life Fitness.

No one claims to be able to rationalize the decline and then renewed interest in bikes, but speculation abounds. Clearly, it was logical for bikes to reign prior to the onslaught of nifty and sensational cardio gizmos like treadmills, steppers and ellipticals. As those products caught fire in clubs and homes, former bike aficionados drifted to the next new thing, but they never forgot their old friend. Bikes, you see, just won't go away.

“The exercise bike has been the long-term staple product—the first real home exercise piece,” said Michael Rice, CEO of Trixter. “Everybody relates to it and can do it. But for so long the bike was just left behind and not taken to the next level.”

### EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

In the past three years, however, manufacturers like Star Trac, SportsArt, Nautilus, True, Bodyguard, Technogym, Impex, Life Fitness, Precor, Cybex and virtually everyone else too, including a couple of new players—have invested heavily in their

bikes, with big payoffs. Several offering new bikes have said that demand has markedly exceeded expectations—in some cases with unit sales tripling and revenue jumping as much as 200 percent. Guess a piece that was freshened up with some trick comfort and performance features—and the recumbent helped too—did sell again once they got worked back into a normal three-year product cycle.

“The ‘a bike is a bike is a bike’ stigma has been out there for a long time,” said Terry Woods, senior product manager at Star Trac. “And it's because all the manufacturers essentially were doing the same things with bikes.”

Funny thing, though, since retailers like Tom Woodman, regional manager of The Fitness Shop in Washington, still reported a history of good bike sales. “Our sales of bikes have been strong for so long, and I don't see this as a lower tier category at all.”

And neither do the manufacturers leaping on the bike-redesign wagon think of it as lower tier. According to Mike Olsen, marketing and key accounts manager at Horizon Fitness, the category deserves attention. “There will always be a need for bikes, and because no one has really owned this, there's definitely incremental business to be had.”

And these aren't just newbie exercisers who are buying the pedal machines. George Shaheen, owner of George's Gym Equipment in Clinton, NY., said past customers sometimes add a second piece for their home workout room—voila, a bike.

“Some people are purchasing bikes as a secondary or alternate workout tool a year or so after buying a treadmill or elliptical, particularly if they are working out with a spouse.”

Optimistically, some see bikes as one much less intimidating piece for the older and now-heavier American too. “The recumbent bike is a great way to get the beginner or non-committed exerciser started on the right track,” said Todd Ibis, COO of the Push Pedal Pull chain in the Midwest.

Here, here, said Chris Cox, director of product and mar-

keting for Vision Fitness. “The wellness revolution may take time, but it's coming, and more people are going to have to exercise eventually.”

### NEW BELLS AND WHISTLES

It's not as if the guts of stationary bikes have changed much over the years. These days the tweaking and updating are more about other areas, such as comfort and convenience, design and aesthetics, and entertainment options.

» **Comfort and convenience**—When your tush is planted on a seat for 20 minutes or more, comfort can be a hot topic, not to mention when your feet are on pedals, backs in recumbent seats or hands on grips.

“We spend a lot of time on the feel of the bike and the end-user engaging with it,” said Precor's Susan Bell. “No matter what bells and whistles you have, if the product doesn't feel right, users won't come back.”

Star Trac researched the differences between and desires of upright versus recumbent users, and then incorporated them into its new Pro Series. The uprights have racing handlebars, and the recumbents sport a magazine rack that slides closer to the user and comfortable armrests.

On its bikes launched in 2003, SportsArt added a fore/aft seat adjustment on its uprights, step-through access and a unique, supremely comfortable mesh seatback a la Herman Miller on its recumbents. “The mesh seatback breathes, features a self-conforming lumbar support and includes a pocket for an ice or heat pack,” said Scott Logan, director of marketing for SportsArt.

More about convenience than pure comfort, pedals have been widened to accommodate bigger shoes, personal fans have been added to consoles, and Star Trac redesigned its pedal straps to a ski-boot style for easier one-hand adjustability. Seemingly minor changes such as relocating contact heart rate sensors to rear or racing handlebars also are becoming increasingly standard. A new retail brand to debut at the Health & Fitness Business show in August 2004, New Balance Fitness Equipment (by Fitness Quest, by the way) will have a series of never-seen-before, patent-pending comfort features: For example, two-sided pedals with one side contoured so a home exerciser can workout sans shoes as its research found many do, and cushy gel hand grips for that “aaaaah” feeling.

“If you're showing innovation, you have





to have it at the first touch point," said Fitness Quest Executive Vice President Mike Clark. "The first touch point emphasizes the brand message of fit and comfort."

And manufacturers like Impex Fitness, which sells to sporting goods stores, are finding a niche by trying to make bikes feel more true to outdoor riding. Its new Terrain FX upright model (\$300) features a patented gear cluster that allows the cycle to slowly rock fore and aft. That gentle motion, in conjunction with a magnetic brake that modifies resistance, should help riders feel as if they are actually climbing uphill and downhill.

"We're hoping to ignite the category again with this product by offering consumers something innovative, fun and motivating," Mark Ulves, director of marketing at Impex, told GearTrends®.

» **Industrial design**—Since treads, ellipticals and resistance equipment have ditched the boxy, stark and dark look in favor of sleeker and softer lines with muted or metallic colors, it was only a matter of time for bikes to get a makeover too.

"Industrial design is key because first impressions are huge, and the machine has to interact with the environment," said Vision's Cox. "We've studied the auto and electronics industries to bring nice shapes, curves and colors to our bikes."

For example, softer grays, smatterings of color highlights or sexy metallic tones a la expensive cars catch the shopper's eye at retail. For relative newcomer Fitnexus, that's meant more modern designs, while Horizon is retooling with rounded tubing and easy-on-the-eyes, blue back-lit screens.

» **Entertainment**—Creating ways to distract and entertain exercisers certainly isn't exclusive to stationary bikes, but bikes lend themselves the most to reading and today's popular multi-tasking.

In 1999, Vision introduced its iNetTV series that is cable-ready and accommodates a VCR, DVD, CD, video game box or com-



## PACKING THE

# \*PELOTON

» Developed in 1987 by personal trainer and ultra-endurance athlete Johnny G, Spinning—generically known as indoor group cycling—quickly became known as a heart-pumping, sweat-drenching experience that obliterated the boredom of stationary bikes. To do that, it used motivating music, visualization, dim lighting, group camaraderie and even a little competition—inspiring instant devotees.

But, beyond the initial frenzy and honeymoon of no-holds growth, the category plateaued. Club association IHRSA indicates a 73-percent jump in riders from 1.1 million in 1998 to 1.9 million in 2002, and the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association shows an all-time participation high of 6.9 million riders in 1999, a low of 5.4 million in 2000, then a gradual climb back slightly to 6.5 million in 2003.

### » CHANGING DANCE PARTNERS

Recently, a relatively sudden flurry of major manufacturer partnerships demonstrated that indoor cycling still commands significant interest. In late 2002, Johnny G and his Mad Dogg Athletics company split with Schwinn to team up with Star Trac, Schwinn decided to go it alone, and Life Fitness nabbed LeMond's RevMaster (again single after being left out of the StairMaster sale to Nautilus). Last year, Matrix Fitness Systems snapped up the ultra-hip Trixter X-Biking program, and FreeMotion Fitness hopped in the saddle with Tomahawk out of Germany.

Mad Dogg, as well as Schwinn—which considers bringing indoor group cycling to the masses one of its biggest accomplishments—both claim other companies are joining the pack to win dollars in a viable category.

"Manufacturers like to be able to offer the whole package, and indoor cycles have proven to be a 'bread and butter' product for fitness facilities worldwide," said Tracey Harvey, the Nautilus Fitness Academy director.

According to Matrix President Ken Lucas, distributing Trixter's unique X-Bikes has stimulated business. "Just like the step revived aerobics classes," Lucas said, "we are rejuvenating indoor group cycling with the X-Bike's innovation."

### » A RACE WITH NO FINISH LINE

According to manufacturers, the outlook for group cycling bikes remains strong. "We are seeing a second and third wave of sales increases due to the product lifecycle and the number of fitness facilities that are implementing programs for the first time," said Harvey.

One beauty is that bikes intended for indoor group cycling are great and sturdy mounts for home workouts too, especially with somewhat moderate price tags of about \$900 to \$1,400. Trixter just introduced a \$1,200 retail package that includes a bike, manual and a workout CD; others undoubtedly will follow suit.

Further growth, however, will require more innovations such as the X-Bike's articulating handlebars, or new electronics and feedback capabilities (such as LeMond's Pilot system), improvements in durability and comfort and additional programming. But purveyors are confident.

"I don't think the category has hit its peak by any means," said Kim Green, vice president and general counsel at Mad Dogg. "Facilities continue to tell us about full classes and waiting lists, and we expect growth over the next five to 10 years."

Photos Courtesy of Matrix X and Precor.

puter on a flat-screen LCD display. Despite adding about \$1,500 to the product price, retailers indicate that it attracts customers.

More recently, Technogym and Life Fitness equipped cardio machines with LCD screens to view cable TV programs or DVDs or listen to music. The LCD screens on True's newest ZTX commercial series bikes allow for customizable displays showing up to six readouts simultaneously, including an actual ECG waveform display that's not only fun to watch but pretty accurate too.

As for pre-designed workouts, Star Trac's bikes are compatible with its Pro Partner PDA programming, and Precor worked with a physician to create a customized fitness test that correlates to VO2 max. In addition, True developed the Personal Power program that calculates and delivers different workloads corresponding to the rider's body weight.

#### DOWN THE ROAD

What's coming around the bend for this never-say-die category? Surprisingly, manufacturers and specialty fitness retailers seem to be on the same wavelength, cau-

tiously claiming that drastic, revolutionary changes are unlikely, but that fine-tuning and demographic influences will keep sales stable or climbing slightly.


Features like walk-through designs, comfortable seats and easier-to-use pedal straps are predicted to become standard. Advanced electronics and entertainment capabilities are important additions, but many say that costs must decline before they can truly become mainstream.

Various populations could get their own differentiated bikes, according to Bell at Precor. Cox at Vision echoed those sentiments. "I see incremental improvements that make bikes specialized for different segments of the market, like seniors," Cox said. "Everyone knows how to sit down and pedal a bike, and we continue to invest here because the growth potential is huge."

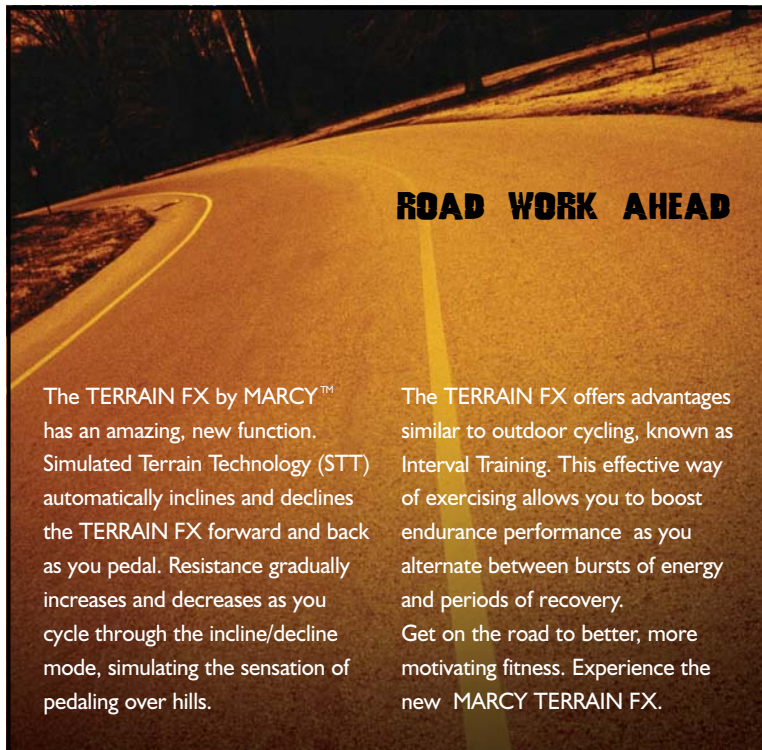
This isn't a point missed by a soul.

"There are some pretty exciting things that still can happen in this category, and bikes could become much more fun to ride," said Pat Warner, senior vice president of product development at Nautilus

and, coincidentally, a former bike racer himself. "We will see more advancements on what the bike feels like when you are riding it—there haven't been any major strides here in a long time."

With the increased and increasing flow of ideas, the industry may someday be able to recreate more of the beloved leg-pumping, heart-pounding, nothing-can-stop-me fun that carefree outdoor biking abundantly bestows upon kids. 

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