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strength



a revolution of sorts is taking place on the home front. A not-so-new idea—buoyed by new design concepts and more companies entering the market—is gradually replacing the traditional need for a large rack of various size dumbbells. GearTrends® last year dubbed them “multi-weight dumbbell systems,” made with two handles that can morph into a wide range of weights—either by flicking levers, rotating dials, matching colors, or mixing and matching thin plates.

For the consumer, these systems mean a superior space-saving alternative—the equivalent of the entire dumbbell rack in the space taken by two dumbbells on a stand. For the retailer, that means a better chance of an additional high-margin sale for someone already buying a cardio piece who may be worried about space. The new dumbbell systems can also get someone into a moderately priced strength-training system (bench, plus dumbbell system) without the space-hogging need of an entire rack or home gym. For the manufacturer, that means a whole new market waiting for even more innovation. Come on down.

A BIT OF HISTORY

The multi-weight dumbbell system category was launched in the early '90s by PowerBlock (www.powerblock.com), expanded with ProBell (www.probell.com) in 1998, and in 2002 was joined by Hoist (www.hoistfitness.com) with its selectorized Quick-Change system, which won The Super Show 2003 Product of the Year award.

By the summer of 2003, two other companies joined the ranks—Nautilus (www.nautilus.com) with its SelectTech weight system, and TurboFit, a lower-cost alternative with designs by the same inventor behind, you guessed it, the Select-Tech. As of this writing, TurboFit isn't yet fully operational and shipping products, though its two dumbbells, the SelectaBell and the TurboBell, can be viewed at

www.dumbbellsdirect.com, which is still in the planning stage. One other company, Dosho Design (www.dosho.com), run by Dosho Shifferaw, who invented the Bowflex, is quietly launching yet another handheld multi-weight concept that he calls the Dosh-Bell and DoshBench. Get a first peek, live, when they are unveiled at the Health & Fitness Business show in Denver this August.

NUMBERS TALK

According to various reports published in the last two years, the overall strength-training category has been growing year-in and year-out, albeit by single digits. And in the last several years, use of free weights, most predominantly dumbbells, has grown from 22.6 million users in 1987 to 51.6 million in 2003—an impressive 129-percent growth, or so said reports from American Sports Data (ASD). Even more impressive—and this is the root of the growth in popularity for multi-weight dumbbells, many told us—is the fact that the growth among women during that period was even higher—a rather stunning 233 percent. The humble dumbbell has gone mainstream, thanks to women (who according to ASD accounted for 47 percent of all

A REVOLUTION IN STRENGTH-

BY MICHAEL HODGSON



Photos courtesy of Dosho Design

people training with free weights in 2003), as well as older fitness enthusiasts and personal trainers.

Digging even deeper into the pile of numbers and statistics published by SGMA, NSGA and ASD shows the number of people using dumbbells in 2003 sits at about 30 million—give or take a few million or so. Estimating (albeit unscientifically) that 50 percent of those are women and that a few million more might be in the category of “older than a fine wine,” it might be safe to surmise the potential market for multi-weight dumbbell systems rests at a healthy 18 million. Oh, and growing, of course. Now, then, gang, it’s math time. Sharpen your No. 2 pencils: Figure the average selling

as well as more control over the range of motion and balance.”

Highsmith pointed out, and others we spoke with agreed, that what the industry sees manifested in the clubs (i.e., more dumbbells) and talked about in the media (i.e., far more coverage of dumbbells and multi-weight systems) has translated into a growing interest from the consumer in dumbbell systems for the home.

Despite the acknowledgement that the market is growing and potentially huge, Life Fitness has no plans to enter the dumbbell or multi-weight dumbbell system market anytime soon because Highsmith said PowerBlock and others are already meeting the market needs well.

we’ll see the market going in the next year, we believe. PowerBlock already indicated potential direction for multi-weight systems by offering a barbell option last year to add further versatility for consumers—and we’ll lay money you’ll see more options added this year: Almost every company has a bench of some type, but DumbbellsDirect.com is now showing its “multi-purpose” SelectaBell Bench that converts from a simple flat bench to a step platform for aerobics or other strength-training maneuvers.

But, wait, there will be more: Shifferaw showed his DoshBell and DoshBench to GearTrends® in April before they launched, with a wink that what he was showing us was just a beginning. His DoshBell concept,

TRAINING IS TAKING PLACE AND THE TRADITIONAL DUMBBELL AIN’T WHAT IT USED TO BE.

price for a multi-weight system that ranges from about 5 to 50 pounds is \$250. With that in mind, we can safely estimate that a manufacturer is earning \$100, give or take, per sale. Multiply \$100 by 18 million and you arrive at a very, very heavy number: \$1.8 billion (give or take). Clearly, the dumbbell ain’t so humble after all. No wonder the eyes of manufacturers and retailers light up. No wonder everyone is jumping on the multi-weight bandwagon.

No doubt every home-gym company under the sun has eyed those numbers, seen the trend, and pondered it long and hard. Jay Vollmer, marketing director for PowerBlock, said he believes that some of the new products are a result of large companies seeking other sources of revenue to achieve growth, and that it’s likely we’ll see more weight- and cardio-oriented companies jump aboard in the next year or so.

“In home gyms, there are a lot of very good companies all making essentially the same thing in different colors,” said Vollmer. “There is a very strong market in dumbbells, so I am sure each is hoping that if they can come up with the next new thing, which is so hard to do, it will be a way for them to increase their slice of the overall pie.”

There is also a subtle shift occurring, according to Greg Highsmith, senior business director for strength products at Life Fitness: Popularity is moving from Olympic bars and plates to dumbbells.

“In the club setting, you are seeing a lot more space dedicated to dumbbell racks and training areas rather than lines of Olympic flat benches,” said Highsmith. “The growth in dumbbell popularity also has its roots in the growth in personal training, where, in clubs, trainers almost always gravitate toward dumbbells because they offer flexibility in terms of exercise variety,

NOT THE CLUBBING TYPE

Think clubs and, of course, you see a lineup of multiple racks of dumbbells that can serve multiple users off the same rack. Multi-weight dumbbell systems are limited to one user per set. Meaning, ya gotta buy a whole lot o’ multi-weight systems to accommodate the same number of members working out using one full rack of dumbbells—and 10 multi-weight stations are going to take up a lot more space than one dumbbell rack.

In addition, free weights and dumbbells get treated harshly in gyms, said Michael Rojas, president of Iron Grip Barbell Company, one of the largest suppliers of commercial-quality dumbbells.

“Dumbbells in a commercial environment take a tremendous beating. We encase ours in urethane and weld them and even then they break. Even the best selectorized pieces right now have multiple parts and movement, and the more moving parts something has, the more likely it is to break,” said Rojas.

That’s not to say commercial gyms haven’t noticed the advantages of a multi-weight system and bought into the concept in a limited fashion. According to Vollmer, one gym owner in Houston began noticing that every evening his staff had to gather up scattered dumbbells from the cardio room and return them to the weight room. That’s because folks would take them there to use while waiting for an available machine. So he added a few sets of PowerBlocks to the cardio room that gave his customers rapid access to the weights they wanted in a very compact space while saving the gym time and money.


GAZING INTO A CRYSTAL DUMBBELL

Variations on the versatility theme are where

“Lock-And-Go,” is more secure and easier to use when adding or subtracting weight than existing systems, he said. In combination with the DoshBench, Shifferaw showed us how easy it is to load up a pair of DoshBells and begin a full range of lower body exercises including leg extensions and leg curls.

Shifferaw said he also believes that his weight-plate nesting system, along with the Lock-And-Go clip, will translate well into the commercial environment and go beyond simply providing durable and easy-to-use multi-weight dumbbell stations. Without elaborating, because we promised not to, Shifferaw is taking versatility and ease-of-use to plate-loaded systems, eliminating the need to manually take large plates on and off a bar. It’s a concept he is sure gyms—and insurance companies—will love.

And, finally, we can’t overlook aesthetics. We don’t believe that aesthetics may necessarily be THE deciding factor in a purchase. Still, the multi-weight dumbbell systems could grab the eyes of the female buyers, who either buy or control the purchases in a large percentage of incidents. Pat Warner, Nautilus senior vice president of product development, pointed out that a lot of consideration went into the design aesthetics of the Nautilus SelectTech for that very reason: “Women shopping with their husbands for fitness equipment have a tremendous influence on the purchase.” Shifferaw said he agrees wholeheartedly, adding that he created his products to be “compact, user-friendly, and with a bright color so it is inviting and like a piece of furniture.”

Compact, versatile, easy to use and yet aesthetically pleasing enough to blend in with the furniture. There’s nothing dumb about that. 

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