

HomeGym

MAGAZINE

FALL 2007



ELLIPTICALS

THE FASTEST GROWING SEGMENT IN FITNESS EVOLVES:

WHICH MODEL IS THE RIGHT STRIDE FOR YOU?

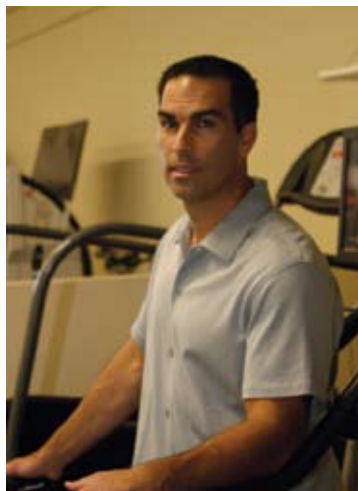
Fitness equipment manufacturers are always on the lookout for the next big thing on the exercise horizon. That “big thing” has hit in the form of the elliptical trainers. Since Precor rolled out the first version in 1995, the machines have been moving up the popularity list among consumers and health clubs, incorporating several improvements along the way.

Ellipticals are now second only to treadmills in total dollar sales, according to 2006 statistics from the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association. In fact, elliptical machine sales to consumers increased from \$201 million in 2005 to an astonishing \$725 million in 2006. During that same period, consumer treadmill sales dropped from \$1.16 billion in 2005 to \$1 billion in 2006.

The machines combine the sliding motion of the older stationary ski machines with the up-and-down motion of the stair-stepper and generally can be programmed to provide a more rigorous workout than either of those. The reason why an overwhelming majority of health clubs now stack row after row of elliptical trainers is that the “ellipse” motion is a non-impact movement. The cardiovas-

cular system gets a good workout while the hips, knees and back don't have to pay for it.

“Ellipticals are a more comfortable product for people to use,” said Chris Fisher, president and CEO of Out-Fit, a fitness equipment dealer in Simi Valley, Calif. Fisher said he still considers the treadmill the most efficient cardio exercise machine because the body is supporting its own weight during the workout and burning more calories. “But the elliptical is the next best in my opinion. When you go to the elliptical, you're also standing up and supporting your weight.” People who have tried the elliptical trainers in health clubs are also buying



“Whatever feels comfortable to you ... that's what you'll use”

- Chris Fisher, Out-Fit

them for their home. As a result, they often base their buying decision on what they see in the club.

“A lot of people start in the clubs and they'll see Precor and Life Fitness, so they will compare (home models) against those two,” said Fisher. That can be a plus because manufacturers of machines that are heavily used in the clubs also have extensive experience in knowing what works. “They've already done all the research and design and they apply that to a home version,” Fisher said.

However, not all home versions are the same quality as the health club versions. Some can be made of a thinner gauge of steel or use bolts instead of welds in the construction. Those little details can result in a different feel to the home model.

Fisher offered these tips when considering an elliptical trainer: **Try out several makes and models:** These days, fitness manufacturers patent many aspects of their products, including the movement of their elliptical machines. The result is a wide range of variables, from the distance between the pedals, the motion of the arms to how high your knees go up. The only way to find out what feels best is to get on as many ellipticals as possible.

Ask questions: Consumers should be aware that they would most likely NOT be talking to a sales rep who sells all the brands of ellipticals. Your local dealer might have exclusive rights to sell PreCor and Horizon, but is not an authorized dealer for Life Fitness and Octane, as an example. Ask questions to dis-

tinguish fact from fiction and visit several locations.

Stride movement: People are built differently, so there is no perfect movement for everyone, Fisher said. A machine with which you are familiar might not have the movement that is best for you. The new machines with adjustable features do help, Fisher said, but cautioned that features such as the bar height, pedal height, foot pedal distance will feel different to different people. “A big guy has a different gait than a smaller person,” Fisher said.

Getting On and Off: Ellipticals begin moving as soon as you step on so safety is a big issue for first timers. Machines that have a side entry/exit usually take up more space. Machines that load from the rear make it easier to put another machine next to. If space is an issue, consider more than just the size of the machine.

Special Features

What was once an option on an elliptical trainer is now a standard feature. There are heart rate sensors on the arms, a variety of workout programs as well as adjustable stride length.

But Fisher said too many people get caught up in the number of controls. “For a lot of companies, the trick is to decorate (their products) with all the bells and whistles,” Fisher said. “But the movement of the machine has to be good.”

“All good manufacturers will have heart-rate controls that are Polar compatible.”

Go for comfort: “Whatever feels comfortable to you -- if you enjoy the movement -- that's what you'll use,” Fisher said.

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fitness.therapy.wellness.