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NEWS

January 21, 2008

Stationary bike comes with a view

By RAY WEISS  
Staff Writer

One biker's pedaling through a snowy mountain pass, while the other's heading through a redwood forest.

Neither has left the Ormond Beach YMCA.

The two men are working out on Espresso S2 stationary bikes that offer a wide variety of realistic interactive computer programs that put riders, at least mentally, outdoors in races, or even in a cyber world slaying dragons using pedal power.

"It's great. It keeps your attention off other things, like pain," said a smiling 62-year-old Chris Bayley after completing his first ride on the machine. "You don't get bored because you're not focusing on the actual exercise. The scenery keeps your interest."

The updated models of the bikes made by Espresso Fitness debuted in October and are making their way to exercise facilities and clubs across the country. So far, the Ormond Beach and Port Orange YMCAs are among the first in this area, having bought two machines each for \$3,500 apiece.

"It has the real ride of a bike. Going up and down hills you have to shift gears," said Martin Vollebregt, an avid bicyclist who's a spinning instructor and the fitness director at the Ormond Beach YMCA. "It imitates a bike ride like no other machine I've been on."

Besides 30 gears, the latest Espresso S2 has movable handlebars so riders can negotiate turns, as in real life, for their five-minute to one-hour interactive workouts. They can choose between 25 programs of varying difficulty on the 17-inch display monitors.

"There are no other products similar to it," said Brian Button, Espresso's chief executive officer, whose company does not make stair climbers or treadmills with the same technology. "It's really for adults and children. You'd be amazed how many adults there are with childlike tendencies."

Other companies like Cybex International are developing interactive exercise machines like the Trazer, an aerobic and agility program that's popular with children at after-school fitness centers.

Among other things, the Trazer offers a program that mimics a popular arcade jumping game, providing a rapid-fire workout where heart rate and the height and speed of leaps are all recorded by a computer.

"I like Cybex. They're developing a whole game plan to open kids centers with this equipment," said Tasso Kiriakes, owner of Bodez by Tasso fitness center in Ormond Beach. "But kids' facilities haven't fared well over the years. Kids don't stick with programs. They get old after awhile. We find the most success when parents and kids work out together."

He said his health club is planning to start a youth fitness program within two months that will focus on a group workout rather than an interactive gaming approach.

Computer games tied to making exercise easier have been around for about a decade, but Vollebregt said none can compare with the technology of the Espresso S2, which offers riders a genuine riding experience, as well as a welcome distraction from obsessively having to watch the minutes of a machine's timer tick away.

"If they're popular, we'll get more," he said, while selecting some pre-programmed rock music and a snowy mountain ride on the bike. "Your mind really gets into it, what's on the screen. And this is safe. There are no cars or no flat tires. And you get the same exercise."

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Did you know?

*The 25th Infantry Bicycle Corps, a turn-of-the-century regiment of all-black enlisted men and a white officer, conducted arduous field trials to test the military potential of bicycles, a new invention at the time:*

- In 1896, seven members of the 25th Infantry made a 790-mile round trip between Fort Missoula, Mont., and Yellowstone National Park. The following year, 20 soldiers bicycled about 1,900 miles from Fort Missoula to Saint Louis, Missouri.

- Each soldier's bicycle was equipped with about 55 pounds of supplies. Due to bad weather and rough terrain, soldiers sometimes carried their bicycles.

- By 1898, the start of the Spanish-American War, the Army ended its testing, concluding this new technology had limited military application.

SOURCE: News-Journal research

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