

TV presenter Jenny Powell enjoying her virtual spinning at LivingWell



Virtual reality

Combine interactive gym equipment with the theatre of the mind and you have the latest in fitness elite. **Sarah Clark** reports on the emergence of virtual fitness, industry acceptance, and its popularity with paying customers.

In an ever-advancing industry, fitness professionals are always looking for inspirational ways to motivate the reluctant exerciser, encourage new members to venture into the gym – and of course, ensure that the dedicated exerciser stays dedicated.

Many health clubs, spas and leisure centres have taken on board the latest technology in their quest to keep members motivated. As the e-revolution takes off in a massive way, we focus on fitness technology that looks set to gain the confidence of the exercisers throughout the nation.

Club scene

LivingWell has found that its take on the spinning exercise craze, Virtual Spinning, is a popular addition to fitness classes at its Islington club. A DVD screen at the front of the class shows specially commissioned film footage of coastal Scotland and the wild hills of the Lake District, while class members work out on stationary bikes. LivingWell has found that a virtual change of scenery, and side shots showing the cyclists in competition with other riders, motivates members. Some members say that it gives them a sense of competition as the team of cyclists race to the top of the hill. Well it certainly beats pedalling away whilst staring absent-mindedly in the mirror and thinking about what's for dinner! —Glenn Webber, health and fitness manager at LivingWell, comments; "With Virtual Spinning, LivingWell is pioneering a

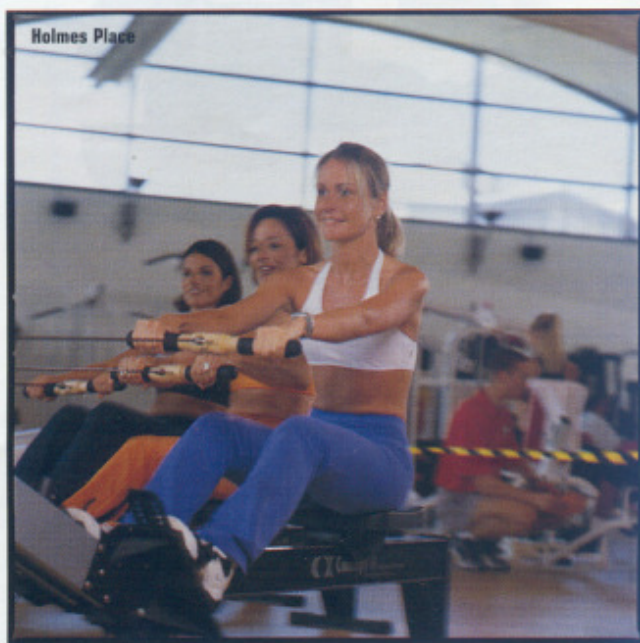
totally new exercise concept – a world first in fact. People often find it difficult to achieve their fitness goals through lack of motivation and a repetitive exercise routine. Mental and physical stimulation is needed to exercise effectively. Virtual Spinning provides this stimulation – it gets tough when you look up and see the steep hill ahead of you, but you get a sense of real achievement when you reach the top and cycle down."

LivingWell intends to make classes available in its Premier clubs throughout the UK by the end of 2000. It is also looking to expand the concept to offer Virtual Rowing and Running.

Holmes Place is committed to the concept of in-gym entertainment with the latest Cardio Theater – an audio visual entertainment system linked to plasma screen televisions showing various terrestrial and satellite TV channels. The system is accessible from every piece of cardiovascular equipment in the health club, and there's also the option to tune into any one of the eight available national radio stations. All members need to do to enjoy the full experience is bring their own headphones. So there'll be no more need for Holmes Place members to miss the gym because they're serious soap addicts!

Meanwhile, in Holmes Place's newly refurbished 'Defensores de Chaves' club in Lisbon, Portugal (sponsored by Reebok) the company has installed a video wall in the entrance foyer, showing members participating in exercise classes. The screen is designed to inspire members to take part in one of the many

FITNESS PROFESSIONALS ARE ALWAYS LOOKING FOR INSPIRATIONAL WAYS TO MOTIVATE THE RELUCTANT EXERCISER; ENCOURAGE NEW MEMBERS TO VENTURE INTO THE GYM - AND OF COURSE, ENSURE THAT THE DEDICATED EXERCISER STAYS DEDICATED



classes available and has proved to be very successful, motivating some members to take up a new pursuit, and reducing the number of people staring through the glass while classes are taking place.

The Virgin Active Club fitness area prides itself on having over 200 of the most innovative and user friendly pieces of equipment available. These include the Biostrength luxury range and the Selection Line, Technogym's new training machines. The gyms are fully equipped with Cardio Theater. The studios offer Spinning, Boxercise and Pilates as class options. After a workout, members can relax in the Life Library, a quiet area where they can sit, read reference books on a huge range of topics, listen to music, and access the internet free of charge.

The Forum spa, in South Wales (which has recently been awarded a '5 wave' grading from the British International Spa Association) sports an impressive gymnasium filled with the latest Powersport cardio equipment. It uses the newest FITECH

technology to devise tailored training programmes and monitor individual progress, and has in-gym TV and radio entertainment to keep members from treadmill related boredom. The emphasis on entertainment stretches as far as the cinema and computer room, which is available to members of all ages.

Although **Ragdale Hall** has a state-of-the-art gym, it doesn't claim to have interactive machines. It does, however, have the latest in fitness classes - the popular Cycle Reebok class - where members are encouraged to use visualisation to aid their workout. Class members imagine cycling up steep hills while the instructor motivates the class to work harder. Cycle Reebok classes take place on unique Studio Cycles, designed and programmed by **Reebok**.

It's no news that **Cardio Theater** is featured in many leading health clubs, including Holmes Place and the Forum. Members love it - and it has become a standard piece of entertainment equipment for the gym. Designed to relieve workout boredom, Cardio Theater gives exercisers a choice of options to liven up their workout at the touch of a console button. Users can channel hop from watching TV to video, or perhaps listen to their favourite CD, tape or radio station whilst getting fit. The latest development in the Cardio Theater range is Wireless Cardio Theater - the same concept, but without the need for wires. This is obviously better aesthetically, but also much more convenient for gym managers. Cardio Theater is now commonplace to the modern gym environment and has become an essential requirement for many members.

Forward thinking fitness

Although new fitness equipment quickly becomes standard, companies are constantly advancing ideas. Long gone are the days when all that was needed to equip a gym was a few sets of free weights, and some basic cardio machines. Manufacturers are competing to grab the interest of the fitness clubs, which are in turn keen to attract and keep some-what fickle gym-hopping members. With the internet being integral to business, it was only a matter of time before the dotcom revolution interacted with the fitness industry.

Manufacturers are still some time away from designing fitness equipment that actually does the workout for you - and makes you a nice cup of herbal tea afterwards - but the latest innovations in the fitness arena make you wonder just how long it's going to be before they do!

The **Fitlinxx** system is both an electronic personal training system and a linked website for fitness centres. Developed by two American university graduates, who wanted to exercise but found little motivation to stick to their workout, the Fitlinxx system motivates users with coaching and instant feedback. The web site allows fitness centres to reach potential and existing members through the Internet. Instructors monitor performance and send e-mail messages to members giving them advice. From the clubs' perspective, the technology also helps managers identify members who need help (before they give up their fitness programme) or target members with a particular interest. →





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→ It's endorsed by more than 30 equipment manufacturers- including **Life Fitness, Reebok and Stairmaster.**

Technogym, one of the most innovative equipment suppliers in the market, has developed **Technogym System** software, an ideal solution for clubs looking to link their management information with the exercise data of their customers. The system connects the fitness equipment to a computer - **The Wellness Expert** - which members log on to. Fitness staff can track members' performance and set fitness goals, while members can check their progress, see how they're doing, and print out their results (if they feel inclined). The **Technogym System** was introduced in 1997 and is superseded by the latest **Wellness Trainer 4.0**, which will be launched at LIW this September.



Technogym Wellness Trainer

Technogym has also teamed up with computer membership companies to offer a fully computerised gym experience, covering all aspects of the visit - even down to locker operation and ordering a post-gym snack! For managers, the system automatically highlights members who haven't attended in some time, so that a 'gentle reminder' can be sent. Members can access personal details, contact instructors, and receive gym updates by logging on to, mywellness.com, on any remote computer. A personalised key, called the **Technogym System Portable Memory** stores details of individual workouts, and allows the holder to use facilities at other linked clubs.

The fully integrated system is up and running in **Special Sports** in Holland, while the first UK clubs to benefit will be

Greens Health and Fitness in Croydon, and **Virgin Active**, Stockley Park. **Technogym** is also the official provider of strength and cardiovascular equipment to the 2000 Olympic games in Sydney, including the Paralympics.

Linking in with the Paralympics, the **THERA-vital** from **medica** is designed for paraplegics/tetraplegics, and is beneficial for those with medical conditions including multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease. The **THERA-vital** continuously adjusts to ensure that users attain the best individual results. There's the option for users to set their own maximum pulse limit, and if this is exceeded the machine adjusts the pressure to bring it back down. Features also include:

- Adaptable grips
- Voice control
- Biofeedback on pulse, speed and state of spasm occurrence

The machine is designed to cater for unique needs, and can be supplied with arm rests, therapy grips and safety handles. **THERA-vital** is also used in many hospitals and rehabilitation clinics. **Cyclone Mobility and Fitness Equipment** in Ellesmere Port distributes the entire **THERA** range.

"A Personal Trainer for every member" is **Oxide's** proud claim. **Oxide** is the result of three years research and development by manufacturer **Vitawell Spa Group**. With its latest **Electronic Motion Control (EMC)** designs, **Oxides'** eye-catching range combines modern design with the latest technology and has taken Europe by storm since its launch last year. Users choose the best resistance programme for their needs, selecting weight loss, toning, muscle building or explosive strength. The speed indicator advises of the repetitions needed to get results. Customers have found it



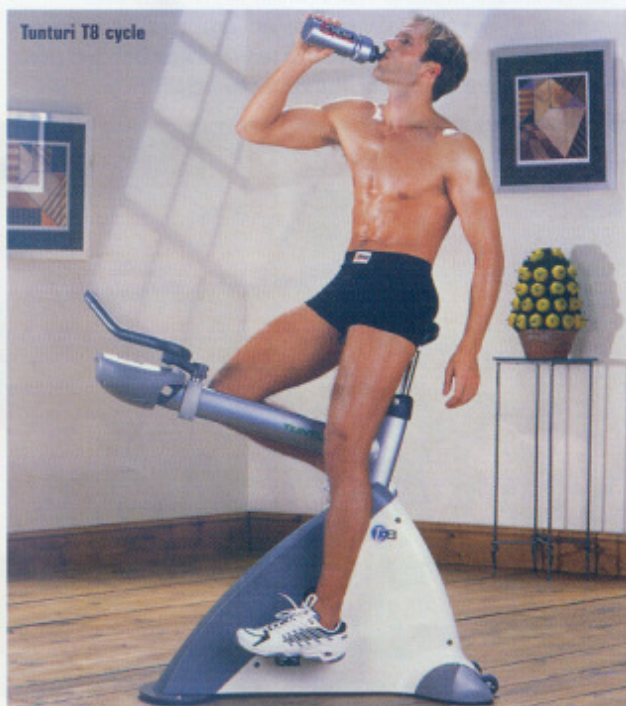
easy to use, and it's proved to be a good motivator. **Vitawell** offers a full support package to club managers which includes virtual gym design software, staff training, promotional support and nationwide service backup.

When it comes to fitness machines, the **Tunturi Interactive Electronics** range claims to be knocking at the Mensa clubhouse door in the field of intelligent exercise devices. The **Alpha 200** and **300** interfaces have a whole range of features, including:

- Pre-programmed workout profiles.
- Weight loss programme.
- WHO (World Health Organisation) three-step fitness test.
- Software upgrades for new Tunturi programmes and features.
- In built help function.

Users feed in basic data, and the computer designs a tailor made training programme. For people who want to lose weight, the programmable weight loss feature asks how much weight they would like to lose, and how fast - the machine then calculates how much exercise effort is needed and even how many calories they need. The **Alpha 300** can store up to 40 individual workout profiles and invites users to take the WHO 3-step fitness test before creating the ideal endurance programme.

The interfaces are compatible with the **Tunturi T8 Ergometer** cycle, called 'the bike with brains'. The **T8** itself has recently become a bit of a celebrity - it featured on **BBC2's Newsnight** in January 2000, in a programme analysing the way computers improve our lives. More recently the cycle appeared on **CNN** as part of a design and innovation exhibition touring Europe. →





DOMINIC O'SULLIVAN VIRTUALITY AMOYA

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In another high tech attempt to combat the boredom of the long haul workout, **Netpulse** technology enables the more net-friendly fitness centre members to surf the internet on their fitness machine console. They can also watch TV or listen to music while exercising. Customers' own personalised workout logs can be stored on the internet, and US users get to collect awards, air miles and gift certificates - even more motivation to exercise, although at present these benefits are only available to users in the States. Netpulse is considering an alliance with Life Fitness, but negotiations are still taking place so Life Fitness is unable to comment.

One of the reasons that exercisers give for abandoning their fitness plans is boredom. **Konami** aims to combat this with their fun product, the **Dancing Stage EuroMIX**. Konami has worked closely with Universal Music Solutions, part of the Universal Music Group, to feature its repertoire within the **Dancing Stage EuroMIX**. The idea of the game is to follow on screen instructions telling players where to put their feet in time to the music. Arrows on screen indicate



Dominic O'Sullivan, fitness manager of **The Academy** (1999 single club of the year in the FIA's FLAME awards) has some doubts about the mass appeal of virtual fitness technology. Here, he comments on the arguments for and against interactive equipment.

Arguments against:

"It can be off-putting for the non-technically minded, some people will always want a more personal approach rather than virtual instructors, and there can be a potential loss of client to staff contact."

Where interactive equipment fits in:

"Technology can be a great tool for staff who are already fully skilled in dealing with the needs of their clients. However, a lack of skill in programming and support can be hidden by a reliance on technology. If we strip things down to the bare bones, we need to develop a relationship with clients who cannot self-support themselves through the changes in behaviour needed to achieve a healthier lifestyle. When we have developed that trust and relationship it can be useful to move on to more self-supportive machines, which give more feedback and monitoring. I think a club starting from scratch can use virtual fitness equipment if it is aiming at a specific market sector. Otherwise there is a danger that you invest money in equipment that is only used by a small number of people, and would be left with a shortage of traditional kit at peak times. One possible option would be to set up a virtual zone (e.g. a separate area housing interactive equipment) and run it as a group session. The question is, do we want virtual instructors?"

Home front

For home users, **Oxygen** enables its users to join a virtual health club on the internet. Once they've installed the **NetTrainer** software onto their computers and connected their home exercise machines, members can take part in events with people from all over the world, live on their PC screen. They can compete against them, and even meet up in the cyber lounge afterwards for a post-event gossip. The online **Oxygen** club is available 24 hours a day and also offers support from a qualified personal trainer who sets members a six month training schedule and presumably nags them by e-mail to actually stick to it!

when the player should be stepping up, down, left or right, and the result is frenetic dancing! With over 28 songs and four levels of difficulty, every game is a new challenge and can improve personal fitness. The in-built Konami Internet Challenge function also allows locations to take part in online competitions, offering members the chance to win prizes.

Definitely worth a mention is the **Oxygen Club** web site, www.oxygenclub.com. The site uses **Cybersport's NetTrainer** technology to co-ordinate and control exercise machines over the internet. This might sound very Big Brother, and visions of treadmills going haywire spring to mind, but in fact it's all very civilised. Health club managers will be interested to know that **CyberSport** designs, builds and manages systems that can be used to create communities of exercisers within health clubs, companies and across the world. **Oxygen** is currently in discussion with major health clubs.

It remains to be seen whether interactive equipment will stay the distance, or be replaced by another trend in a few years time. For health club managers though, anything that can attract and retain more regular exercisers by keeping ahead of the rest, has got to be a bonus! •

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FitInxx

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