



Choosing the RIGHT Cardio Equipment for Your Facility

BEFORE BUYING CARDIO EQUIPMENT FOR YOUR FACILITY, KNOW YOUR POTENTIAL USERS, AND RESEARCH ALL OF YOUR OPTIONS.

By Stephen A. Black,
M.Ed., P.T., A.T.C., N.S.C.A.-C.P.T.

Choosing the right cardio equipment is much like buying a car. Each manufacturer has its own features and benefits, and the dealership salesperson is on a mission to create a sense of urgency toward an immediate purchase. What is the consumer to do? Just like when buying a car, education and due diligence are the keys to making the appropriate decision about which cardio equipment to purchase based on what is best for your fitness center.

According to IHRSA's (International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association) *2003 Profiles of Success*, the median amount spent by IHRSA member fitness centers on new equipment in 2003 was \$34,478. If even 25 percent (\$8,619.50) of this was spent on cardio equipment, the significance is obvious. According to the National Sporting Goods Association, American consumers spend more than \$1.49 billion on tread-

mills, \$189 million on stationary cycles and \$83 million on elliptical machines. With so much money being spent, it makes sense to research your options before you buy. Here are some considerations when selecting cardio equipment for your facility.

POTENTIAL USERS

Equipment choices can vary based on facility users. For instance, older adults may be more comfortable on traditional cardiovascular equipment, such as stationary cycles, while young adults may prefer the latest machines, such as ellipticals. Consider the age trends in your facility when buying cardio equipment.

According to IHRSA's *2002 Trend Report*, the typical fitness center membership is noted below:

- 8 percent are 12- to 17-years-olds
- 34 percent are 18- to 34-years-olds
- 37 percent are 35- to 54-years-olds
- 17 percent are 55-plus
- 48 percent are male, and 52 percent are female

When deciding which cardio equipment to purchase, it is

imperative to consider these demographics. Analyze your facility's membership, and identify the potential users of cardio equipment by asking the following questions:

- What proportion of members has low fitness levels or chronic medical conditions? Knowing this figure is important, because membership growth with older adults has seen a 226 percent increase.

- How many members are active, regular exercisers?
- Are youth under age 16 allowed to use the facility?

With the increased emphasis on walking, treadmills are a sure bet. Walkers and runners alike will make the most efficient use of this tried-and-true product.

When judging potential users of your facility, it is wise to consider the needs of members with disabilities. The Americans With Disabilities Act led to guidelines on the accessibility of health and wellness centers. These guidelines suggest that one of each type of equipment be made accessible to wheelchairs (including clearing floor space).

FACILITY TRAFFIC

Another important consideration is the amount of usage your center receives. Traffic will depend on the size and demographics of the membership, as well as the facility's hours of operation. A good rule of thumb is to expect that approximately 20 to 35 percent of the active membership will take advantage of the facility consistently. To help estimate usage, survey the members about their interest in using cardio equipment. Find out their primary intended use, and what features are important to them. Including members in the decision process can enhance retention.

FACILITY STAFFING

Although facility operators may not outwardly admit it, fewer staff members reduces the payroll and increases overall profits. Equipment manufacturers have recognized this fact, and have capitalized on it with their advertising. "Beware the wolf in sheep's clothing" is appropriate to anyone who tells you that their equipment will reduce the necessity for trained staff or overall staff requirements. The presence or absence of a staff person may affect usage. Facilities that are staffed tend to be used more for several reasons:

- Members perceive them as being safe.
- Intimidation is less of a factor because someone is available to demonstrate proper use of the equipment.
- Staff presence tends to facilitate socializing.
- Staff may be perceived as a motivating influence.

TYPES OF CARDIO EQUIPMENT

The major categories of cardiovascular equipment include treadmills, stationary cycles, stairclimbers and elliptical machines. A variety of cardio equipment is important, since different machines and modalities fit different members' needs. Also, variety prevents boredom among exercisers, which helps maintain usage and retention. A progression can be established with the cardio equipment, to move members according to their initial condition and their desired goals.

Treadmills. Treadmills are a staple in any fitness center because they simulate walking and running and have virtually no learning curve. Beginning exercisers can walk on a treadmill at a com-

fortable pace, and elite athletes can use this modality for speed, hill or interval training. From a caloric expenditure viewpoint, treadmills will burn the most calories per minute per kilogram of body weight.

To identify the most appropriate treadmills for your fitness center, find out the following:

- Age range of your facility and corresponding appropriateness of the specific brand.
- Condition levels the treadmill will accommodate.
- Approximate ranges of body weight of your members. This is especially important due to the increase in overweight and obese individuals joining facilities these days.

- Number of hours of use and maintenance schedule.

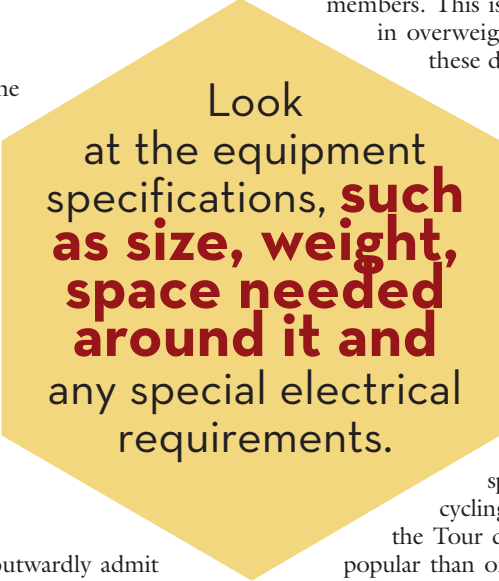
When the choice has been narrowed, look at the equipment specifications, such as size, weight, space needed around it and any special electrical requirements. Typically, a dedicated electric line will prolong the life of the motor. Be leery if the intent is to run entertainment systems and tracking devices off the same line. The treadmill may short the other devices and affect motor life.

Stationary cycles. Stationary cycles are usually the least expensive and most space-efficient. With the renewed interest in cycling (thanks to Lance Armstrong's fifth win in the Tour de France), stationary cycles may be more popular than once thought. Also, many stationary cycles are self-powered, allowing flexibility in the overall floor plan.

Two types of stationary cycles are available: upright and recumbent. Upright cycles are the traditional cycle, while recumbent cycles allow users to sit behind the pedals on a wider seat in a semi-reclined position with back support. Recumbents are popular because they are comfortable; the back support they provide makes them ideal for beginning or deconditioned exercisers, or those with back problems.

Stairclimbers. Stairclimbers are available in two types, based on the stepping motion. Independent stairclimbers have pedals that respond specifically to the exercisers' pressure. When an exerciser stands on the pedals, they both sink to the ground until the user begins climbing. With dependent stairclimbers, the pedals are linked together. When the exerciser steps down on one pedal and pushes it down, the other one goes up. Personal preferences vary; more serious exercisers may prefer the independent action that requires a bit more skill, and beginners may like the ease of use of the dependent stairclimber.

Elliptical trainers. The newest category of cardio equipment is the elliptical machine. Seen as a combination of a stairclimber and a cross-country ski machine, this type of equipment features pedals that follow an elliptical pattern that can go forward or in reverse. Some models also have an optional incline for the pedals. Others feature upper-body exercise, as well, by including arms that move in synchronization with the foot pedals. Special care should be devoted to biomechanical alignment of the hip and knee on these



Look
at the equipment
specifications, **such
as size, weight,
space needed
around it and
any special electrical
requirements.**

devices. Some manufacturers have not considered human factors analysis when designing and building these machines. The consequence is poor alignment that can result in injury.

Elliptical trainers have surged in popularity because they are easy to use and have minimal impact on the joints. Although exercisers may be working vigorously on an elliptical, they perceive less exertion than when performing a comparable exercise at the same intensity, such as running. Furthermore, with an upper-body option, users can perform a total-body workout that burns more

Including members in the **decision process** can enhance retention.

calories than a lower-body-only exercise in the same amount of time.

OTHER EQUIPMENT AND FEATURES

Other equipment such as rowers, cross-country skiers, and upper-body ergometers are options for consideration. Upper-body ergometers provide upper-body rotary exercise for cardio and strength training. Features such as bi-directional resistance and a variety of modes of exercise are important considerations with these machines. For a diverse membership, one of these machines is recommended.

Additional machine feature considerations include the following:

Ease of operation. The easier a piece of equipment is to use, the more use it will get.

A “quick start” feature. This is for those who want to begin exercising without the “bells and whistles.”

Continuous heart rate monitoring. A heart rate system that uses a transmitter rather than intermittent pulse is best.

Wireless heart rate control. Users set the target heart rate, and the machine adjusts the workload to maintain constant workload, independent of speed.

Workload control. Exercisers set watts, and the equipment maintains a constant workload independent of speed.

A high-quality display panel. Display panels should be large, visually appealing, easy-to-read and have high density.

A random profile. A random profile allows for an infinite number of workouts.

Profile variability. Look for pre-programmed protocols with space to program custom protocols.

TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

There are lots of options when selecting cardio equipment for your facility. Take your time, shop around and think carefully about what meets your needs. Never buy equipment on impulse or under the pressure of “specials” by the manufacturer. In fact, you should try out any equipment under consideration (in your exercise clothes) at least several times before you buy. Have the manufacturer leave the equipment at your facility for a 30-day trial and concede to member comments, needs and desires. **FM**

Stephen A. Black, M.Ed., P.T., A.T.C./L., C.P.T., CEO of RockyMountain Human Performance Center Inc., Boulder, Colo., provides individualized programs for athletes, weekend warriors and post-rehab clients. Black has 20-plus years' experience in the health and wellness industry, and has worked with professional teams, including the NFL, NHL, NBA, WNBA and ABL/NBL affiliates. He is also a presenter for the health and wellness industry. For more information, visit www.clubcoach.net.