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can be doing everyone ill



Getting personal
Fitness machines know
users' names and needs

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DAZZLED APPLICATION

Today: Partly sunny.
High: 35-47. Low: 20-25.
Tomorrow: Sun, mostly sunny.
High: 32-47. Low: 20-25.
Next Week: 1:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
Broadcast: 5:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
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Business & Innovation

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Workout regimens take forward step

By Hiawatha Bray

GLOBE STAFF

You don't have to be a genius to take up bodybuilding -- especially if you've got a weight-training machine that does all the thinking for you.



Après Health and Fitness Inc. has created an \$8,000 Internet-savvy system designed to help gym junkies unleash their inner Schwarzenegger.

Mike Lannon, cofounder of the

Norwell-based company, said it's high time for fitness devices to enter the 21st century. "The industry is surprisingly backward when it comes to technology," Lannon said.

There are plenty of electronic treadmills and rowing machines that keep track of time or calories burned. But the data are discarded at the end of each workout. Fitness buffs can buy home computer software that will generate a personal workout plan and let the user log each day's performance. The Koko Smartrainer combines these features. The machine knows the user by name, understands what kind of workout he or she needs, and



PHOTOS BY JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Mary Obana, cofounder of Après Health & Fitness Inc., demonstrates the company's Koko Smartrainer, which features a flat-panel color video screen (left) that prompts users through a custom workout program.

Exercise Program tries an online approach

can share that information with similar machines anywhere in the world.

The machines are so popular at the Springfield YMCA, where they are being tested, that the YMCA plans to purchase three.

"It is unique. There's nothing like it," said Springfield YMCA president Stephen Clay. "In a sense, it's like having a personal trainer."

During the Internet boom, Lannon founded an Internet retailer, Send.com, that specialized in online wine sales. The company fell afoul of complex state laws restricting mail-order wine sales and didn't survive the Internet collapse at the turn of the century. Since then, he has been on a quest for the next big thing -- "business opportunities for aging baby boomers," he said.

The generation of Americans born in the 1950s and 1960s is now well into flabby middle age, he realized. Why not use digital technology to lure them into health clubs? Lannon said he figures it will take more than stacks of iron weights to keep people coming back to the gym. "Technology has improved and impacted every corner of their lives," he said, "but fitness is still boring."

So Lannon teamed up with Kim Blair, founder of the Center for Sports Innovation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to design a fitness machine with a brain. The Smartrainer resembles many other multipurpose weight-training machines, with the exception of its flat-panel color video screen that swivels into position in front of the user. The screen enlivens the sweat and strain of weight training with a tutorial that shows how to perform each exercise. When doing a chest press, for example, an on-screen indicator shows how quickly the user is performing the exercise, while a second indicator shows the



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Après Health & cofounder Mary Obana holds the removable storage device that carries fitness programs tailored to individual needs. The device is inserted into the Koko Smartrainer monitor slot, and a user's personal workout is loaded into the machine.

correct timing. By keeping the two indicators in synch, the user gets the maximum benefit from the workout.

The Smartrainer tracks each user's performance and generates a complete fitness program based on age and weight. The program can be constantly varied to ensure that the user gets fit and stays fit.

"Your body physiologically responds to new challenges," said Blair. "Having, in effect, a physical trainer embedded in your fitness machine keeps you honest."

Each user can store data on a cheap portable USB "thumb drive," so the user can load a personal profile into the machine every time he or she visits the club. In fact, a Koko user can plug the thumb drive into any other Smartrainer, at a health club in another town or at a hotel. Up pops the personal fitness profile and instructions for the day's workout.

Meanwhile, data from each Koko workout are plugged into a computer at the health club. This computer relays the data over the Internet to the company's headquarters, where data on each user will be stored and analyzed.

"Everything you do on that machine, from the moment you start to the moment you stop, we know it," said Josh Roman, vice president of software planning and development. The only piece of sensitive information stored in the computer is the user's name, and for privacy's sake, users can log in under a false name. Koko's maker uses the data to update its fitness profiles. For example, if the company finds that its recommended settings are too strenuous for most 55-year-old females, it can cut down on the number of repetitions.

At the Springfield YMCA, Clay said, the users' only complaint was that the machine's workout program for the abdominal muscles wasn't tough enough. Koko engineers are already reprogramming the sequence to make it tougher.

The Springfield YMCA isn't the only place ready to buy a Smartrainer. Koko Fitness has taken 50 orders for the machine. Lannon plans to launch full-scale production next year, with sales limited at first to New York State and New England. If all goes well, Koko Fitness will begin nationwide distribution in fall 2006.