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Tour de Web

Video bikes a bonanza for Lance wannabes

There are few more forms of exercise more frustrating than a stationary bicycle.

After all, the basic idea of bicycling is to get up and go someplace. And while seeing the sights, you should also be getting a great workout, sun and fresh air.

On the other hand, there's sitting in one place with a towel around your neck, getting wet and winded. It's not something that's going to appeal to either the exercise-shy or easily bored.

But thanks to modern Internet technology, it's now possible to get both a workout and a virtual tour of some scenic location without ever leaving the gym.

Ted Murray, owner of the Punta Gorda Club, said he's excited to finally offer his members a chance to try the Spark system video exercise bicycles manufactured by Espresso Fitness Corp., of Sunnyvale, Calif.

"Our members are gradually learning about them. Right now, we haven't had to put people on a reservation list," Murray said. Two of the systems -- priced at \$5,000 each -- were installed at the club in early March.

The Spark system is designed to "make indoor cardio training as fun as outdoor sports," according to Espresso Fitness' corporate vision statement.

Murray added that he believes the Spark bicycle could be one of the most addictive exercise programs created in recent years.

Basically, the Espresso system combines a familiar piece of workout equipment, the stationary bicycle, with Internet-based animated video.

It takes less than a minute to program the bicycle and get ready for a workout. Each bicycle has a small video screen atop the handlebars. The computer asks riders to select a virtual course from four menus -- "basic," "moderate," "challenging" and "extreme."

Just the names of these virtual course are enough to inspire even sedentary souls to hit the road. The "basic" level includes "Fruitdale," a course along mainly palm-lined

streets that could stand in for any Florida city. There's also "Evening Bliss," which resembles some of the parks around Washington, D.C.

Assuming you ever make to the "extreme" level, you can challenge yourself on the "Gut Buster" or "Savage Revenge."

The courses are mainly three or four virtual miles long and time out to a 20- to 25-minute workout.

Murray explained that there's more going on here than the computer providing an amusing bit of virtual sightseeing as you pedal along a course.

Actually, that would probably be enough to make the Espresso system a winner, Murray said.

But the computer does a lot more. It will give you your heart rate and the number of calories you've burned in your workout. You can also select among any one of 30 gears.

"Lance Armstrong is a pedaller," Murray explained. He tends to keep his bicycle in a relatively low gear that requires a lot of pumping, but relatively easy pumping. Other bicyclists opt for higher gears that demand more brute power on the pedals, but yield more rotations for each push.

Perhaps the most extraordinary feature of the Espresso system is the way it can simulate slopes. Riders will have to pedal hard on upgrades -- and, no, you don't have the option of dismounting and pushing your bike to the top of the hill.

On downgrades, you're better off shifting to a lower gear, while holding on for dear life.

"It was great, it was tough!" said Cherrie Richter, of Burnt Store Isles, about her first virtual bicycle tour. "It's a great way to work some muscles that you've never worked before."

Another twist is the presence of other virtual cyclists ahead and behind you. The character immediately in front is your "pacer," who can be adjusted to go slower or faster depending on your skill level.

The other virtual characters come and go. You can pass them, or fall behind them -- but, no you can't run anyone off the road.

Neither can you endure a virtual wreck, even though many of the courses feature hairpin turns on downgrades that would challenge Armstrong himself.

Two or more Spark bicycles can even be configured so that riders can have virtual

races against each other, Murray said.

Murray said that he believes that Espresso Fitness has a major winner on its hands, and one that's only going to get better as Internet bandwidth continues to grow. Espresso will be continually creating new and challenging courses that can be streamed to Spark machines in gyms around the world. Eventually, live video may be substituted for animation providing the ultimate in virtual bicycling thrills.

"Someday, they may even offer some of the portions of the Tour de France, just like where Lance would have raced," Murray said.

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