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TOP-RATED HOME-FITNESS EQUIPMENT

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Rowing Machines ◆ Treadmills

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- Assisted Living: How To Find Quality Facilities
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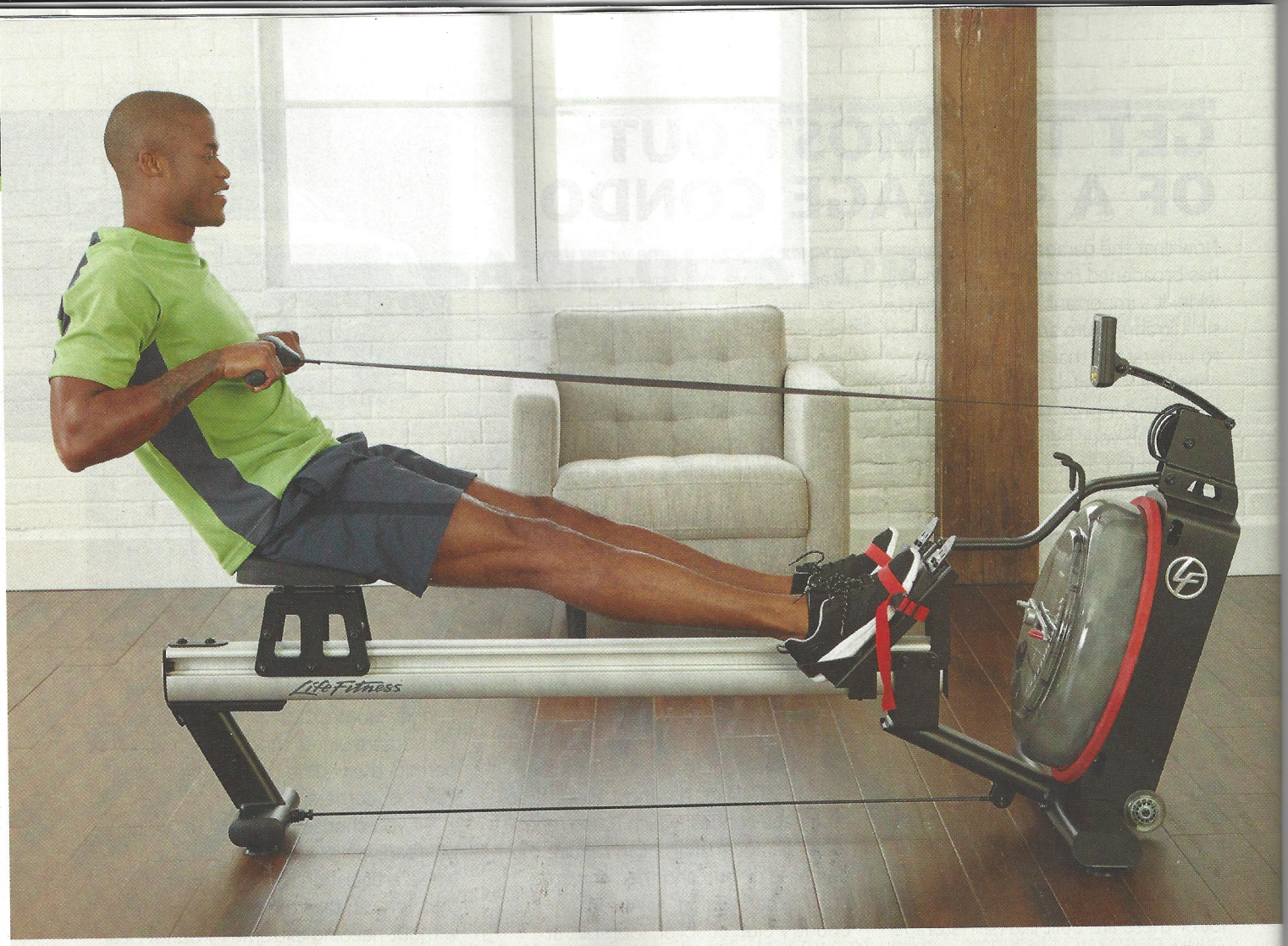


EXERCISING GOOD JUDGMENT

TOP-RATED HOME-FITNESS EQUIPMENT

Elliptical Machines • Exercise Bikes • Home Gyms • Rowing Machines • Treadmills

Manufacturers are adding connectivity options to home-fitness equipment, and one mobile app even allows you to run the London Marathon in your own home. Meanwhile, companies are introducing elliptical/treadmill hybrids that reduce the impact on your knees.

By Roy M. Wallack

Like most things nowadays, home-fitness equipment seems more connected by the minute. In the past 3 years, we saw an explosion of connectivity to home-fitness equipment, including the capability to store your workouts, compare your results with previous results and those of your friends and control your machine through a mobile device.

What's good news is that prices remain stable in all categories and price ranges. In fact, we found that in many cases, you'll receive better performance today for the same amount of money as you would have 3 years ago. For example, treadmill manufacturers added connectivity options to their models, increased the horsepower by up to 1 hp and expanded the length of the tread belts by a few inches to accommodate longer paces and faster running—for no corresponding price increase.

LIFE FITNESS

VIRTUAL PACE. Would you like to run in a world-famous race while you exercise on a treadmill in your own home? We reported on so-called virtual races 3 years ago, and 2 years ago they emerged in the form of two apps: RunSocial and Virtual Runner.

RunSocial is the only app that allows you to race in real time against other people who use the app. It provides mile-by-mile, high-definition footage of 15 courses, including the London Marathon and the Prague International Marathon, to an Apple iPad tablet computer or a high-definition TV that's connected to your iPad. You can run in RunSocial races with TreadTracker ($130), which is a Bluetooth-enabled accessory that you place under your treadmill to track your real-time speed through the virtual race. Alternatively, you can use RunSocial's built-in pedometer, which translates the vibrations from your treadmill into a rough estimate of how fast that you're running. Finally, you can connect your RunSocial app to a Life Fitness treadmill that has a Discover (starting at $2,899) or a Track+ (starting at $2,999) console monitor. The app speeds or slows the video to match your pace on the treadmill and raises the incline to match the terrain in the video.

One note: RunSocial's TreadTracker or pedometer works on any treadmill, but at press time, the app adjusts the incline and speed automatically on only Life Fitness treadmills. We tried RunSocial, and it delivered an immersive, realistic experience. We just wish that it were compatible with more than just the iPad. RunSocial says it will add Google Android compatibility in 2016 but didn't tell us when.

Outside Interactive's free Virtual Runner app works with any treadmill on Android, Apple and Microsoft Windows tablets. The app provides footage of 40 courses and routes, which range from $3 for a 5K to $13 for a marathon. You adjust the speed of the video manually to match your pace on the treadmill. Alternatively, if you have a pedometer that has ANT+ wireless technology, you can plug an ANT+ wireless receiver into your tablet, and the Virtual Runner app will adjust the speed of the video to match your pace. Eventually, Outside Interactive wants to integrate the app into treadmills to control the incline and speed automatically, like RunSocial does, but the company couldn't provide a timetable for when this feature might be added.

We'll be interested to see what other interactive innovations are in store for treadmills down the road.

SOFTER SURFACE. The high injury rate that's associated with running, which doctors and running experts typically say sidelines half of all runners each year for some length of time, is the impetus for a new breed of treadmill/elliptical hybrids that are called soft runners. These machines are designed

Best Buys in Home Gyms

Best Buy Categories
[P]=Premium selection
[M]=Midrange selection
[E]=Economy selection

SEE PAGE 64

Best Buys in home gyms were selected based on features, quality of construction, manufacturer reputation and aesthetics.

Conventional home gyms use fixed-path press bars to move weights. *Functional home gyms* use dual pulleys that can be positioned from overhead to floor level on each side of the machine.

Prices don't include delivery or setup.

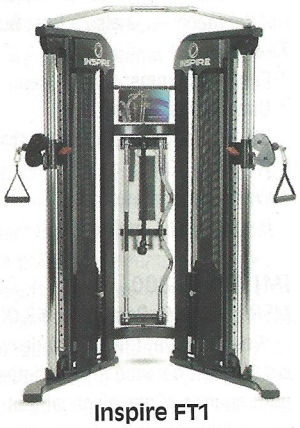
Best Price is a reflection of the lowest retail price that was available at press time and is subject to change.

[P] Bodycraft XPress Pro

MSRP: $2,599; Best Price: $2,599

>> You'd have to pay at least $400 more to get another hybrid home gym, which combines conventional and functional design. We found that the XPress Pro delivers more balance and comfort than do models that cost hundreds of dollars more. Unlike other hybrids, this model includes a feature that doubles the bench-press resistance to 400 pounds.

Features:
* Weight stack: 200 lbs.
* Dimensions: 82-3/4 in. (h) x 57 in. (w) x 83 in. (l)
* Warranty: Lifetime



Inspire FT1

[P] Inspire FT1

MSRP: $2,495; Best Price: $2,495

>> The FT1, which is a repeat Best Buy selection, is the least expensive dual-stack functional home gym that we evaluated that includes the combination of a pull-up bar and a pull-out bench. We found that no other model accommodates as many accessories as this model does.

Features:
* Weight stacks: 2, 165 lbs. each
* Dimensions: 81-1/2 in. (h) x 54 in. (w) x 47 in. (l)
* Warranty: Lifetime

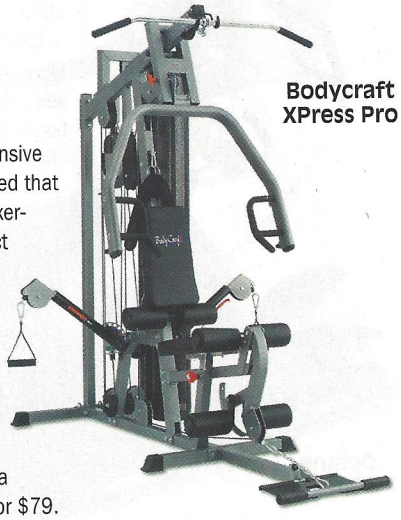
[E] Life Fitness G2

MSRP: $1,499; Best Price: $1,349

>> The G2 is the least expensive home gym that we evaluated that delivers all of the typical exercises that you would expect to find in a home gym. Unlike other models that are in this price range, this model includes a low pulley and an ankle strap for abductors, adductors and standing leg curls. You can upgrade to a 210-pound weight stack for $79.

Features:
* Weight stack: 160 lbs.
* Dimensions: 83 in (h) x 48 in. (w) x 71 in. (l)
* Warranty: Lifetime frame, parts, pulleys, welds; 3 yrs. cables, upholstery pads

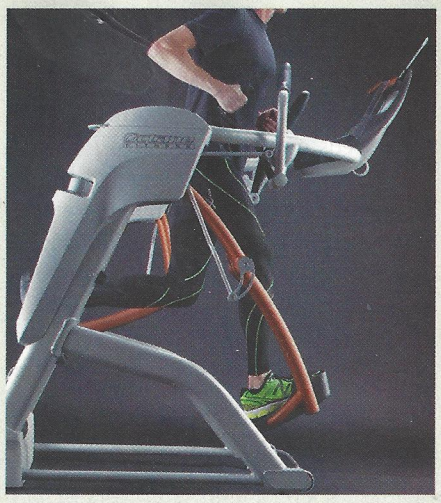
For more information about the above Best Buys, please contact the manufacturers directly. See page 54.



Bodycraft XPress Pro

to reduce the impact that can wreck runners' knees. Five soft runners were introduced from two companies—Octane and Sproing—in the past 3 years, and we expect to see more such models in the next 3 years.

Octane's Zero Runner ZR7 ($3,299) and ZR8 ($4,299) simulate a running motion by suspending you on individual footpads that don't touch the ground. The footpads are connected to leg-like supports that have pivot points at the knee and hip joints. It's sort of like an elliptical, but the footpads allow you more freedom to bend your ankles and knees than do elliptical pads. Because the footpads flex like an ankle does, the design allows you to flick your heel up and almost kick your own butt in a perfect running gait. The Zero Runner also has a large stride length (we got up to 50 inches at full speed, which is double the length of the best ellipticals), and we found that the Zero Runner thoroughly worked our core and legs.



NICE TECHNIQUE. Octane's Zero Runner ZR8 simulates a running motion by suspending you on footpads.

"The Zero Runner's unrestrained range of motion allows a runner the freedom to use good running technique, unlike steppers and ellipticals, which lock you into a contained motion with choppy strides," says Ken Bob Saxton, who is an expert on barefoot, low-impact running.

Sproing's three soft runners—the Runner ($5,499), the Trainer ($6,499) and the Pro ($7,999)—use a harness to tether you to a post as you lean forward and run in place on a 6-inch adjustable cushion of air and high-density foam. A monitor counts your steps and tracks your perceived distance and speed. The more expensive models include more sensors to measure the amount of power that you generate. We tried out the Sproing runners, and the motion feels like running in place in springy sand. We found that it takes a significant amount of work to get the hang of running while you're tethered, but we didn't feel any impact on our knees.

OCTANE

Best Buys in Elliptical Machines & Treadmills

Best Buy Categories
[P]=Premium selection
[M]=Midrange selection
[E]=Economy selection

SEE PAGE 64

Best Buys in elliptical machines and treadmills were selected based on features, quality of construction, manufacturer reputation and aesthetics.

We considered only models that include a heart-rate monitor, which is important to gauge your proper workout intensity and fitness progress over time.

All treadmill Best Buys have instant-response quick keys that allow you to change the speed and elevation instantly.

Prices don't include delivery or setup.

Best Price is a reflection of the lowest retail price that was available at press time and is subject to change.

Octane Q47x

ELLIPTICAL MACHINES

[P] Octane Q47x

MSRP: $4,599; Best Price: $4,199

>> We found that the Q47x, which is an upgrade of a previous Best Buy selection, delivers the best combination of balance, performance and features of any elliptical machine that we evaluated. We also found that this model has the smoothest movement among models that have an automatic stride-adjustment range of 18–26 inches. The **Q47xi** ($5,099), which adds heart-rate control programs, strength-training accessories, Bluetooth compatibility and access to a mobile application that lets you control the machine, is also a Best Buy.

Features:
* Preset programs: 10
* Dimensions: 60 in. (h) x 33-1/2 in. (w) x 72 in. (l)
* Weight: 290 lbs.
* Warranty: Lifetime frame; 5 yrs. parts; 1 yr. labor

[M] True PS300

MSRP: $3,199; Best Price: $3,099

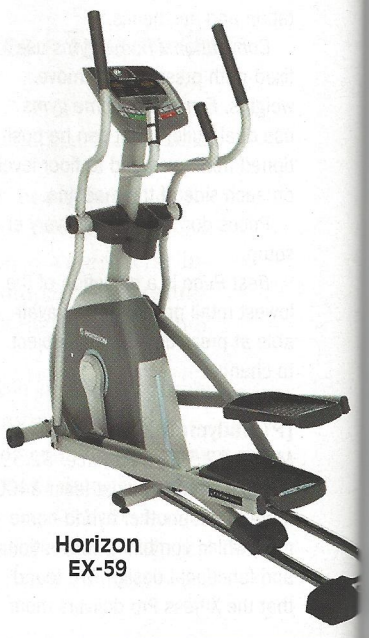
>> We found that the PS300 delivers the best balance and smoothest performance of any elliptical that we evaluated in this price range, because it's the only midrange model in which the drive mechanism is located in the middle of the machine rather than the front. This also is the only midrange elliptical machine that includes built-in side steps that allow you to work your arms while your feet are stationary.

Features:
* Preset programs: 9
* Dimensions: 60 (h) x 35-1/2 in. (w) x 82-1/2 in. (l)
* Weight: 308 lbs.
* Warranty: Lifetime frame; 7 yrs. parts; 1 yr. labor

[E] Horizon EX-59

MSRP: $999; Best Price: $699

>> We found that the EX-59 delivers the best performance of any elliptical that we evaluated in this price range. You typically have to pay at least $300 more to get this model's combination of heart-rate grips on the handles, display screen, audio ports and reading rack. This model's 10 preset programs are



Horizon EX-59

DIFFERENT MUSCLES. Functional strength training includes free-form resistance exercises that hit many muscles simultaneously instead of fixed-position exercises that work muscles in isolation. To replicate some of that functionality in a home gym, about half of all models now include adjustable-position pulley cables that have handles that slide up and down on vertical rails. (Roughly one-third of all models included a functional element 3 years ago.) Because you're unsupported, each exercise becomes an all-body workout: You brace yourself to stay stable through the movement.

You now have to pay at least $2,000 for a home gym that includes a functional element, compared with $1,300 3 years ago. When we last looked at home gyms, you still could find an economy model that had a low pulley bar that allowed you to do two or three functional exercises. Today's designs are more elaborate and allow you to perform at least five or six exercises.

Inspire's FT2 ($4,595), which was introduced in 2015, allows you to do any functional exercise. It's the only home gym that combines a functional trainer and a Smith machine, which is used to do Olympic-style barbell lifts safely.

OFF THE WATER. Rowing machines have seen a resurgence. Annual sales increased 20 percent to $74 million in 2014, according to Sports and Fitness Industry Association (SFIA), which expects the growth to continue for the foreseeable future.

Rowing machines target your core and upper body and deliver a complete aerobic workout without impact on your feet or knees. The low-impact workout that rowing machines provide as well as the current movement toward low-impact exercises partially explains their resurgence. However, SFIA and other experts tell us that rowing machines mainly are "trendy" because of the machine's widespread use in CrossFit and Orangetheory gyms and appearance on the Netflix TV show, "House Of Cards."

We counted 14 rowing-machine manufacturers, which is up from 10 in 2013. Models start at $110, as they did 3 years ago, but we found that you have to pay at least $800 to get a machine that's rugged enough to handle more than 220 pounds and provide a balanced, challenging and comfortable workout. Today's rowing machines typically have none of the connectivity features that are prevalent in ellipticals, exercise bikes and treadmills, however.

The Inspire CR2 Cross Rower ($1,595), which was introduced in December 2014, takes the old-fashioned rowing machine to a new level. It's the two more than are on any other economy model.

Features:
* Preset programs: 10
* Dimensions: 64 in (h) x 25 in. (w) x 68 in. (l)
* Weight: 145 lbs.
* Warranty: Lifetime frame; 2 yrs. parts; 1 yr. labor

TREADMILLS

[P] True PS800

MSRP: $3,999; Best Price: $3,999

>> We found that the PS800, which is a repeat Best Buy selection, still delivers the best combination of performance and features of any treadmill that we evaluated. We also found that this model provides more stability than do other models, and its 4-hp motor is 33 percent more powerful than what's found in other treadmills. No other model has the combination of an impact-reducing belt, a 9-inch color screen, and a program that maintains your desired heart rate by adjusting your incline and speed automatically.

Features:
* Preset programs: 22, 4 custom
* Motor: 4 hp
* Dimensions: 54 in. (h) x 31-1/2 in. (w) x 78-1/2 in. (l)
* Running area: 21 in. (w) x 60 in. (l)
* Weight: 352 lbs.
* Warranty: Lifetime frame; 30 yrs. motor; 10 yrs. parts; 1 yr. labor

[M] Life Fitness T3 Go

MSRP: $2,599; Best Price: $2,399

>> The T3 Go, which is a repeat Best Buy selection, has the best combination of features of any treadmill that we evaluated in this price range. We particularly like its unique Quick Start feature, which instantly starts the machine at your stored incline and speed settings. Unlike other treadmills that are in this price range, this model also has a secondary control pad that's located near your hand position and allows you to adjust your elevation and speed settings easily. The **T3 Track+** ($2,999), which provides access to custom workouts and online results tracking, is also a Best Buy.

Features:
* Preset programs: 12, 2 custom
* Motor: 3 hp
* Dimensions: 57-1/2 in. (h) x 34-1/2 in. (w) x 79-1/2 in. (l)
* Running area: 20 in. (w) x 60 in. (l)
* Weight: 243 lbs.
* Warranty: Lifetime frame; 10 yrs. motor; 5 yrs. parts; 1 yr. labor

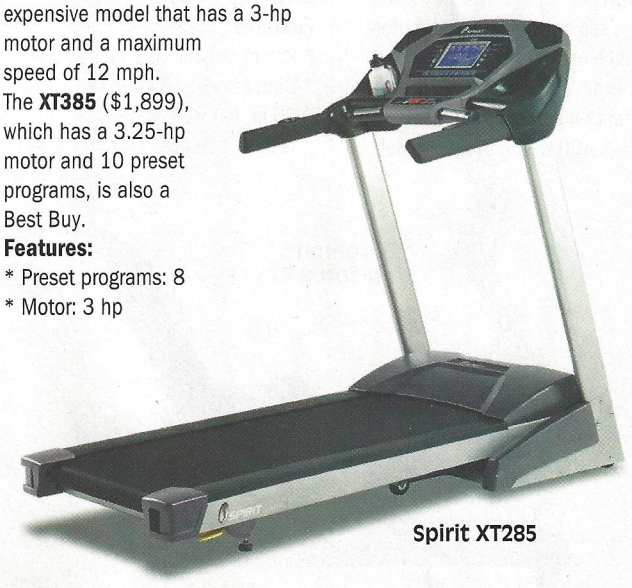
[E] Spirit XT285

MSRP: $1,699; Best Price: $1,499

>> We found that the XT285, which is an updated version of a previous Best Buy selection, still delivers the best performance of any treadmill that we evaluated in this price range. This model is the least expensive model that has a 3-hp motor and a maximum speed of 12 mph. The **XT385** ($1,899), which has a 3.25-hp motor and 10 preset programs, is also a Best Buy.

Features:
* Preset programs: 8
* Motor: 3 hp
* Dimensions: 57 in. (h) x 35 in. (w) x 78 in. (l)
* Running area: 20 in. (w) x 58 in. (l)
* Weight: 242 lbs.
* Warranty: Lifetime deck, frame, motor; 10 yrs. parts; 1 yr. labor

For more information about the above Best Buys, please contact the manufacturers directly. See page 54.



Spirit XT285

only rowing machine that has a solid bar that you pull and, more important, push for resistance instead of a chain or rope that you only pull. The seat moves in an elliptical motion, sort of like you're riding a horse, instead of back and forth in a linear motion as do other rowing machines.

We tried the Cross Rower, and it takes a couple workouts to get used to the motion, but it provides a thorough low-impact workout. That's good news for our feet and knees.

Roy M. Wallace has covered fitness equipment for 27 years. He is the Los Angeles Times' fitness-gear columnist and the author of four books about fitness.

Best Buys in Exercise Bikes & Rowing Machines

Best Buy Categories
[P]=Premium selection
[M]=Midrange selection
[E]=Economy selection

SEE PAGE 64

Best Buys in exercise bikes and rowing machines were selected based on features, quality of construction, manufacturer reputation and aesthetics.

We considered only models that have a heart-rate monitor, which is important to gauge your proper workout intensity and fitness progress over time.

Best Buy exercise bikes are recumbent models, which dominate sales over upright models.

Prices don't include delivery or setup.

Best Price is a reflection of the lowest retail price that was available at press time and is subject to change.

EXERCISE BIKES

[P] Lemond g-force RT

MSRP: $2,799; Best Price: $2,799

>> We found that the g-force RT, which is a repeat Best Buy selection, still delivers the best performance of any exercise bike that we evaluated. This model has the widest range of activity monitoring (23–1,400 watts) of any model, which means that it keeps track of your workout data, even during your warm-up and cool-down activity. We also found that this model's mesh-backed seat, which moves fore and aft and provides five incline positions, is the most comfortable of any exercise bike. The upright **g-force UT** ($2,199) is also a Best Buy.

Features:
* Preset programs: 13
* Dimensions: 48 in. (h) x 29 in. (w) x 60 in. (l)
* Weight: 165 lbs.
* Warranty: Lifetime frame, cranks; 6 yrs. brake; 3 yrs. electronic components, parts; 1 yr. labor

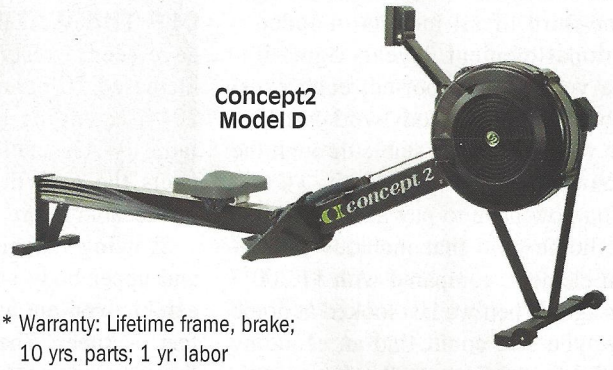
[M] Spirit XBR55

MSRP: $1,399; Best Price: $1,199

>> The XBR55 delivers the best combination of features of any midrange exercise bike that we evaluated. No other model in this price range includes the combination of chest-strap and heart-rate monitoring, two water bottle holders, an audio jack, speakers and a fan. The upright **XBU55** ($1,199) is also a Best Buy.

Features:
* Preset programs: 10
* Dimensions: 48 in. (h) x 26 in. (w) x 51 in. (l)
* Weight: 138 lbs.
* Warranty: Lifetime frame, brake; 10 yrs. parts; 1 yr. labor

Lemond g-force RT



Concept2 Model D

[E] Schwinn 270

MSRP: $799; Best Price: $450

>> The 270 is the least expensive exercise bike that we evaluated that includes the combination of contact and wireless heart-rate monitoring and control programs. We also like this model's workout-tracking software, which allows you to set fitness goals and measure your progress right on the console. We found that to be a rare feature for an exercise bike.

Features:
* Preset programs: 29
* Dimensions: 49-7/8 in. (h) x 27-3/4 in. (w) x 64 in. (l)
* Weight: 117 lbs.
* Warranty: 10 yrs. frame; 2 yrs. mechanical; 1 yr. electronics; 90 days wear, parts, labor

ROWING MACHINES

[M] WaterRower Natural with S4 Monitor

MSRP: $1,095; Best Price: $1,095

>> We found that the Natural with S4 Monitor delivers the best performance of any rowing machine that we evaluated, because it includes a unique flywheel that spins a blade through a water-filled chamber, as do all WaterRower models, for smoother resistance than what other models provide. This model's performance monitor tracks more metrics than do those of other models. We also found that this model's belt drive is quieter than are those of other models. **Dark-ash** ($1,095), **cherrywood** ($1,295) and **walnut** ($1,495) versions are also Best Buys.

Features:
* Dimensions: 20 in. (h) x 22-1/4 in. (w) x 82-1/4 in. (l)
* Weight: 104 lbs.
* Warranty: 1 yr.

[E] Concept2 Model D

MSRP: $900; Best Price: $900

>> We found that the Model D delivers the best performance and features of any rowing machine that we evaluated in this price range. No other economy model allows you to adjust the resistance like this model does. This also is the only economy rowing machine that has a monitor that includes an adjustable arm to view angles and USB compatibility to store your workout data.

Features:
* Dimensions: 14 in. (h) x 24 in. (w) x 96 in. (l)
* Weight: 57 lbs.
* Warranty: 5 yrs. frame; 2 yrs. parts

For more information about the above Best Buys, please contact the manufacturers directly. See page 54.