



Could This Be The Next Revolution In Fitness?

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Many of us in the industry have traveled to trade shows over the past several years, scratching our heads at when the "next big thing" will hit. We've been looking for the one machine, much like the elliptical trainer, that revolutionizes the industry. It may be here.

The Nautilus Commercial Series TC916 TreadClimber is a new, innovative exercise machine that combines two machines in one for a more effective workout (to view the product, visit www.nautilus.com). The TC916 allows the user to walk at an incline (like on a treadmill) and step up (like a stair climber) in one compact format. The motion is similar to walking up a sand dune. User benefits include a low-impact movement, low perceived exertion and increased caloric expenditure, according to some soon-to-be published research.

At first glance the TreadClimber looks similar to a standard commercial treadmill that has been split down the middle so that there are essentially two belts (think two mini-treadmills). The commercial TreadClimber incorporates two dependent, walking-belt surfaces called "treadles" set initially at an incline of 10 percent. Through the full range of motion, each treadle moves from a 20 percent incline to a flat or zero percent incline. When a user starts the machine, each treadle rotates at a speed determined by the workout program or manual setting. The controls offer many of the same benefits of a treadmill or elliptical machine. When the user starts walking, the treadles fall with each step, similar to a stair climber. The higher the level, the greater the vertical displacement.

Users experienced a short learning curve with the product. Our clients and trainers found that within 10 minutes they were able to walk in a balanced manner without holding onto the handrails. Nautilus' treadle technology controls the rate of fall of the treadles based on the walk-belt speed and user level, independent of user weight. This system uses an industrial hydraulic cylinder with an electronically controlled valve to precisely control how fast the treadles fall — similar to a StairMaster stepper. Also, the user console includes a large and readable backlit LCD display.

At each given level, the user does the same vertical work whether they take short or long strides. With a short stride, the user takes more steps of less height. With a long stride, the user takes fewer steps of greater height. However, the net result is the same "rate of climb" for a given level. The higher the level, the greater the "rate of climb." Although this might sound a bit complicated, our testers quickly fell into a rhythm of walking on the machine. All of them felt the motion was truly unique, and most liked the variation from traditional aerobic machines.

As our trainers and client testers became more familiar with the motion of the machines, they found that there were some additional benefits. In order to stay aligned on the unit, they found that there was some independent leg balancing that increased the benefit of the machine. Some also reported that they felt they used many muscle groups including core muscles to maintain balance and correct forward motion.

Nautilus claims that the TreadClimber allows the user to get an effective cardiovascular workout at a much slower speed than a traditional treadmill or stair climber. Both of these benefits speak to the elderly and others who cannot walk at a rapid enough pace to create the right intensity or the treadmill/stair climber user who wants a different workout. With the smooth, gliding movement of the TreadClimber, the user's footsteps are absorbed by the falling treadles. The user doesn't feel the impact that they would when running or walking on a treadmill.

Although Nautilus has only done initial studies, it claims that energy expenditure of performing two exercises — walking at an incline and stair climbing — is higher than one modality. Overall, our testers found that they were able to exercise within their heart rate range by simply manipulating the incline. And, the treadles at an incline do seem to put less stress on the Achilles' tendons than walking at an incline for long periods of time on a standard treadmill.

If the company creates strong consumer awareness with the consumer (as it did with the Bowflex machines), the TreadClimber could be a real hit. Club owners will have the opportunity to showcase the new technology to help increase memberships. In addition, the TreadClimber could increase member usage and retention by offering a fresh workout much as the elliptical trainer did a few years ago.

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