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On the Run

Think you'll actually stick to your New Year's fitness resolution this year? The latest batch of treadmills may have the features (think customized workouts) to finally get you motivated.

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What a thrill! We're here running alongside American marathoner Meb Keflezighi, the same guy who made headlines capturing a silver medal in the Athens Olympics, and whom we're now matching stride for stride as we head into the hill. Glancing over, Keflezighi starts to edge ahead, so we turn up the heat and—could it be?—nose ahead of the country's most famous long-distance runner since Frank Shorter.

Did we mention we're on a treadmill? And Keflezighi is doing more than letting us live out our marathon dreams; he's also helping us sort through the latest versions of these workout staples. The season of New Year's resolutions is upon us, and in the quest to finally lose those 5 pounds, more people are expected to buy treadmills this year than any other major piece of exercise equipment. The machines are the undisputed kings of home fitness, with 4.4 million sold to consumers in 2004 alone. According to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, wholesale sales of treadmills totaled \$1.05 billion that year, a jump of 5 percent over 2003, and more than five times those of their closest cardio competition, stationary bikes. The appeal is obvious: Anyone who's ever put one foot in front of the other can use a treadmill, making it the equipment of choice for everyone from chiseled Ironmen to recovering couch potatoes.

But even with all their popularity, treadmills are undergoing their first big makeover in years. A slew of updated models have recently started to hit stores, featuring everything from sleek new designs to built-in TV screens. And sure, you know that the treadmill you use at the gym has an incline feature so you can run uphill, but some of the new ones now let you go downhill, too. (Yes, it's easier, but it's also good for simulating road running.) Why all the effort? Treadmill makers are running scared from newer machines, elliptical trainers. Far fewer of these are sold than treadmills, but their sales are growing nearly six times as fast. For manufacturers, the challenge has been making an old standby seem new again—and worth a price tag that can range from \$500 for low-power models to as high as \$7,000.

Experts suggest that you focus on those running between \$1,000 and \$3,000, with Therese Iknioan, editor of GearTrends.com, calling \$2,000 “the sweet spot” of treadmills. While most sporting-goods stores carry plenty of models in the \$500 range, fitness experts say the pricier models are worth the investment, especially if you plan to run more than 10 miles a week on them. Built by the same companies that supply health clubs, these machines are more stable and powerful than their cheaper cousins, and they come with features important for conditioning, like high-tech cushioning, training programs and built-in heart rate monitors.

With that in mind, we lace up our running shoes and join Keflezighi at two of New York City's biggest fitness-equipment sellers, Gym Source and Omni Fitness Equipment. We get started with Vision Fitness, one of the biggest makers in the business, and its popular T9200 model, which sells for \$1,299. It's barely on before our marathon man starts to complain about a feature we wouldn't have thought of: the handlebars, which are too low and too small. “What are these doing here?” he wonders, as he reaches down to grab them. He also spots another design flaw in the machine's “quick keys,” which allow runners to go directly to the speed they want without pushing numbers one at a time. Keflezighi says the panel is confusing and hard to read, and once he figures it out, the machine responds too slowly

to his commands. “You won't be able to do anything fun with this,” he says. Not that Vision agrees; it argues its own testing hasn't turned up any of these problems, but that if we wanted to, we could try its deluxe version for \$200 more.

Deluxe or not, most of Vision's models wouldn't turn any heads. On the other hand, the SportsArt 1210 (\$2,299) is a looker, with sleek silver lines that are more appealing than the industry's dull, boxy competition. Keflezighi, however, isn't impressed. “The look is nice,” he says. “But it's something to run on, not to sit there looking pretty.” And he feels function has been sacrificed in favor of form, with the machine's water-bottle holder hidden away in a hard-to-reach spot behind the console. But what really takes this machine out of the running for Keflezighi is its hard surface. One of the biggest reasons people buy treadmills is because they offer a softer surface than hard ground; this one is too tough on our expert's well-worn knees.

Keflezighi raises a skeptical eyebrow before running on our only folding treadmill, the Bladez Fitness BF6525 (recently upgraded and renamed the BF510). Folding models have typically been considered

With features like customized workouts,



▲ Vision Fitness T9200

Price: \$1,299
Motor: 2.5 hp
Power: ★★ ★
Design: ★
Features: ★
Overall: ★

Comment: Confusing controls, and no built-in programs.

▼ Bladez Fitness BF6525

Price: \$1,599
Motor: 2.5 hp
Power: ★★ ★
Design: ★
Features: ★★
Overall: ★★

Comment: Surprisingly stable for a folding model, but noticeably louder than the competition.



flimsier and less durable than their beefier counterparts, but as our expert discovers, they have been getting a lot better. The machine holds steady as he cranks up the speed, and Keflezighi is surprised at how good it feels, though he points out that it's still probably better for smaller exercisers. "I'm not exactly a big guy," he says, pointing out his 127-pound frame. He's also a fan of the extra sets of speed and elevation keys built in to the handrails. But ultimately, Keflezighi doubts most people really bother with folding their machine. "If you use it, why mess with it?" he asks, and when he hears the racket it makes as he cranks it up to 6 miles per hour, he's ready for the next contender.

Noise is a particular issue with those who want to watch TV while running or take a jog without waking the whole house, and compared with the Bladez, the **True 400HRC** (\$2,399) purrs along quietly even as our pro speeds up. The belt also feels noticeably softer to Keflezighi, due in part to proprietary technology that makes the front third of the belt—where your foot strikes the machine—softer than the back portion, where a firmer surface makes it easier to push off. "This one is for someone who'd brag about his treadmill," he says. Another boast-worthy

extra: a built-in heart-rate-control workout, which automatically adjusts the treadmill's speed and elevation to maintain your target heart rate. But even with this perk, the True has just four preprogrammed workouts to choose from, and for its price tag, Keflezighi wants more.

He finally finds it in the **Life Fitness T3-0** (\$2,199). The features start with the treadmill's belt, which is so soft our expert calls it "cushiony," and which has been extended to 58 inches from the standard 54. But even more important, this model is miles ahead when it comes to customization. First of all, it has a family-friendly feature that allows several members to store their vitals and favorite workouts—a big plus for the newlywed Keflezighi, whose wife likes to hit the treadmill too, but not at his blistering pace. What's more, it also has shortcut buttons, labeled "walk," "run" and "jog," that you can program with your preferred pace for each and 12 preset workouts, five of which you can design around your target heart rate. "These are great if you want something extra to motivate you," Keflezighi says. Good advice, but for us, a morning spent jogging with our marathon man is motivation enough. **S**

graduated cushioning and heart rate monitors, it's a close race.



▲ SportsArt 1210

Price: \$2,299
Motor: 2.7 hp
Power: ★★★★★
Design: ★★
Features: ★
Overall: ★

Comment: Nice looking, but has an inconvenient console layout, and Keflezighi found its running surface too hard.

▼ True 400HRC

Price: \$2,399
Motor: 2.75 hp
Power: ★★★★★
Design: ★★★★★
Features: ★★★
Overall: ★★★

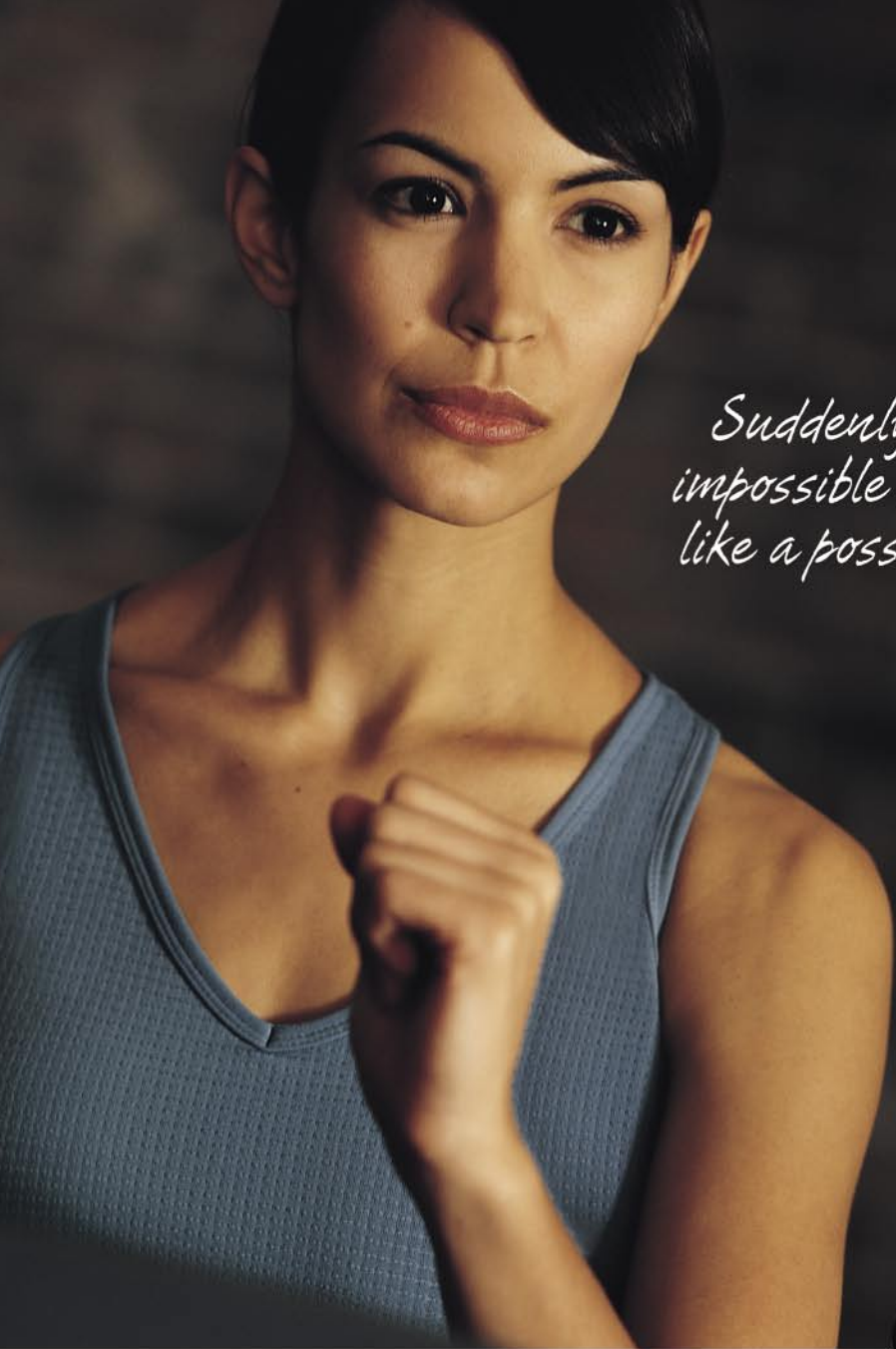
Comment: We liked the machine's soft, comfortable running surface, but for the money, we expected more than four exercise programs.



▲ Life Fitness T3-0

Price: \$2,199
Motor: 3.0 hp
Power: ★★★★★
Design: ★★★★★
Features: ★★★★★
Overall: ★★★★★

Comment: Easy to use and packed with features. Our pro especially liked its 12 workout options and customizable speed settings.



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