



The Rhode Island company that makes the WaterRower machine sees potential in the commercial club market.

A changing tide

Indoor rowing strives to be part of the group-ex mix

BY JOHN CRAIG, Editor

WARREN, R.I. — Overlooked. Misunderstood. Difficult to master.

In health clubs, indoor rowing machines tend to be out of the mainstream, favored by a Zen-loving few but no match for the mass popularity of ellipticals

and treadmills.

A manufacturer like WaterRower, therefore, take its victories where it can get them.

One such place is the East Bay Fitness in Warren—a short distance from WaterRower headquarters—where a dozen or so newly hooked rowers of various ages and fitness levels meet three times a week for group classes.

"There's a lot of technique and

a lot of instruction," said instructor Jill Lancaster, a WaterRower official and former world-class rower who is using the East Bay Club as a demonstration site to spread the word on indoor rowing. "But once people get used to it and focus on the full range of motion, rowing becomes an engrossing exercise."

Part of the challenge, Lancaster said, is puncturing the widely-held perception of

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rowing—that it's more suited to aging Ivy Leaguers and readers of *The New Yorker* than the typical gym-goer.

Concept2, a three-decade-old Vermont company that is the most prominent maker of indoor rowers, has had some success penetrating the health club market through its affiliation with Rowbics, which combines rowing and aerobics.

WaterRower, on the other hand, which has been building its machine since the late 1980s, has historically done about 80 percent of its business in the consumer market. Now the company is expanding its scope, looking to replicate the success of places like Inside Out Gym, a 500-member club in Memphis that bought eight WaterRower machines two years ago and runs 18 group classes a week.

"We went with the WaterRower because we're always looking for something inno-

vative," said Natalie Isaac, a co-owner of the club. "A lot of our members had never seen a rower before, but we talked to them about using it for cross-training and for their core, which is such a catch-word

A Memphis club crafts a pitch that sparks interest in group rowing: 'It's all about the core.'

these days. The minute you row correctly, you understand how great it can be. After two years, I get teachers who say to me, 'Wow, if people only knew how to do it, they'd understand

what a great workout it is."

WaterRower owner Peter King seizes on such testimonials to make a strong case for getting his machine into the group-ex mix. Indoor rowing, King said, "offers more health benefits than any piece of cardio in the club while being the least detrimental on the joints."

"Rowing works 84 percent of the body's muscle groups," added Lancaster. "It's probably 70 percent in the legs. The initial push is like a leg press, with no load on the knees, then the torso and core take over, and you



Rowing may be the most complete cardio workout, but it takes some technique, experts concede.

finish off the with the back and the arms."

There's also a financial argument. At \$1,100, King noted, his product compares favorably cost-wise with treadmills, spinning bikes and ellipticals.

King talks of aesthetics, too, calling the WaterRower "subtle and soft, not harsh and mechanical."

Each stroke pulls on a vinyl strap that

spins a flywheel inside a water-filled casing, producing a smooth feel and a swishing sound reminiscent of the real outdoors. The experience is relaxing, intense, and to most exercisers, very different.

"It might take some time to convince people," King said, "but I think we can get there. After all, rowing—in its natural form—is a group exercise." **FDN**