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Half-game, half-exercise, all fun: Expresso system takes the work out of working out

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SOMERSWORTH — When you race someone in the Expresso Fitness Cardio System — an interactive workout machine that's half-video game, half-exercise bike — it's hard not to get into it.

The trash talk usually comes first.

"I'm not going to let you beat me," Al Tilbe said to his wife, Pam, as the pair stepped onto the bikes at the Works Health and Fitness Center one recent Sunday morning.

The Works bought four Expresso bikes, and set them up in two pairs on the first and second floors. Each bike has a 17-inch LCD screen that gives a first-person view of a virtual mountain bike, and there's bike-handle controller that allows for steering. That's the video game part. The workout part is that the video screen is attached to a regular exercise bike. As a user pedals, the virtual bike goes forward, and the pedaling gets harder or easier depending if the course goes uphill or downhill.

Part of the trend that has seen virtual technology become more and more a part of everyday life, the Expresso bike is essentially a physically interactive video game, something like a souped-up Nintendo Wii.



Aaron Leclerc/Staff photographer An LCD screen attached to the Expresso Fitness Cardio Bike, an interactive workout machine, gives users a virtual mountain biking experience.

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The best part, Merchant said, is racing against another person side-by-side.

After delivering his first trash-talk salvo, Al Tilbe brought out the heavy ammunition as he pedaled against his wife to the "Rolling Thunder" course, which winds through a virtual coastal road.

"She's slow. She's like a grandma," he said. "Whoa, almost went off a cliff there."



Aaron Leclerc/Staff photographer Somersworth residents Alex Melvin and Lindsay Irwin take a competitive spin through one of several preprogrammed courses included with the Expresso Fitness Cardio Bike at the Works Health and Fitness Center.

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"It's something different," said Samantha Merchant, fitness director at the Works.

She said the Works had been looking to get an interactive workout machine for adult members because children were saying how much fun they had playing games like Dance Dance Revolution, which is set up in the children's section of the gym.

"All the adults were saying, 'Why don't we have some fun games?'" Merchant said.

Executive Director George Vierra saw the Expresso bikes at a trade show last year and ordered them.

"People are being pretty responsive to it," Merchant said, adding that members find the bikes to be more motivational than watching television or reading a magazine while working out.

Each bike is hooked up to the Internet, so users can save their best times in a national database or race against other people.

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Oddly Enough

Unlike real mountain biking, Espresso riders can't crash — or fall off a cliff — because there's an invisible wall that keeps the bike from veering too far off course. As for crashing into other bikers, that's also impossible because the virtual bike will go through another one as if it wasn't there.

Pam acted as if her husband wasn't there — she was immune to his trash talk and focused only on pedaling as fast as possible.

About halfway through the course, Al gained a slight lead.

"I know I'm ahead of you," he said.

"I don't think so," Pam shot back.

Their breathing got heavier, and Al admitted: "You don't know how much we didn't want to come to the gym today."

Nearing the finish line, with victory in hand, Al teased: "Oh what's the matter?"

He finished with a time of 3 minutes, 47 seconds — three seconds faster than his wife. It wasn't the huge victory that Al's gloating implied.

The couple, who drove through a snowstorm at 7:30 a.m. to get in their workout before they went snowshoeing in Wolfeboro, said they use the bikes for the cardio part of their workout. Pam now uses it instead of going to spinning class.

"It's a good workout," she said. "It's fun."

"I prefer weights," said Al. "But I got to get my cardio in."

For the record, Pam beat her husband the first time the couple raced, though Al, of course, disputes it. When the subject was brought up, he hid behind a convenient excuse.

"I had to run a mile before, so it was an unfair advantage," Al said, not very convincingly.

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