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A revolution in cross- training?

To some it's the greatest running invention since the treadmill; to others it's a cross-training tool; some say it's a new sport in itself. But what *is* ElliptiGO?

WORDS: JOHNNY DEE

It sounds like a riddle from some bizarre athletics-themed Christmas cracker: how can you run outside without letting your feet touch the ground? Er... drag a treadmill into the gym car park? Nope. Jog in mid air, suspended from a crane? Wrong again. The answer: on an ElliptiGO.

The next question, 'What's that?' – occasionally with the odd colourful word inserted – is one you'll be answering a lot should you get on board one of these intriguing machines. An ElliptiGO looks part scooter, part skateboard, a hint of ski and a touch of Fiat Multipla. Riding one, you feel a pioneer – like one of the first motorists, or people to use a spacehopper.

'It's the future!' I yelled at some befuddled teenagers. 'It's a bike you run on!' I blurted at a curious cyclist. That's the best description I came up with, but a bigger question remains: why on Earth would you use one? And what can it do for your running?

Revolutionary thinking

Let's go back to the beginning. ElliptiGO first hit the streets of California three years ago. It was the brainchild of former triathlete Bryan Pate, who was unable to run because of hip and knee injuries. After retiring from competitive sport in 2005, Pate wanted to carry on exercising but found the riding position of conventional bikes uncomfortable. He didn't want to be restricted to gym equipment, and disliked how long it took to get a workout of the same quality as running. The solution, he thought, was a low-impact running device he could ride on the street, so he went out to buy one. The problem was, no such device existed.

Undeterred, he sketched an idea for an outdoor 'running bike'. Then, having no idea how to actually make it, he hooked up with a friend from the Ironman scene, Brent Teal, who had a degree in mechanical engineering. Together they fooled around with skateboard wheels and wooden paddles until they came up with a prototype. Several versions later they had the refined design – and

finances – to cater for more than just a few curious friends.

The mechanics are ingeniously simple, with foot paddles on moving arms attached to a cog powering a short, upright chain. The frame is surprisingly light, while a telescopic steering column makes it adjustable to fit everyone. Plus, there are bike-style gears to change resistance and tackle hills. You simply stand up, hold on and 'run'.

But why would you want to? For injured runners, ex-runners who never thought they'd run again, or runners who want to up the miles without the punishment on their joints, the ElliptiGO promises the benefits of running without the toll on the body.

For some, depending on stride length, it won't feel *exactly* like running, but it'll be pretty close. A YouTube video of US ultra marathoner Dean Karnazes superimposes his running stride on top of his ElliptiGO stride. The difference is marginal.

Karnazes cites the ElliptiGO as one of his tools for injury prevention. 'I am a big proponent of cross-training for both injury prevention and for maximising aerobic fitness,' he says. 'I run 80-120 miles per week and ElliptiGO 150 miles per week, a lot on hills.'

He's not alone. A growing number of high-profile elites are using the ElliptiGO, including middle-distance runners Charlotte Browning and Andy Vernon, and ultra marathoner Mimi Anderson in the UK, and sprinter Justin Gatlin and marathoner Meb Keflezighi in the US. The great promise is that unlike, say, cycling, you're using exactly the same leg muscles as running. 'It feels just like running, without the impact,' says US running coach Jenny Hadfield. The same could be said of an elliptical machine in the gym, but the ElliptiGO gets you outside, just like running.

'For runners there's nothing better,' says US running coach Bob Augello, who has introduced elite athletes – including US 2012 Olympic 5000m finalist Julie Culley – to ElliptiGO training. 'You get the wind in your face and that feeling of moving around, so you're more likely to get that runner's high.'

Getting on board

It sounds too good to be true, so I pack my suntan lotion, ready to head to California to investigate. Then, 'delighted' to discover that ElliptiGO has arrived a lot closer to home, I instead set off for a week's training in not-quite-so-alluring Milton Keynes, home of ElliptiGO UK's 'chief enthusiast' (Californian speak for sales director) Idai Makaya. My plan: to replicate my half marathon training, impact free.

My first ElliptiGO moments are the epitome of futuristic glamour, slaloming around the wheelie bins at the back of a Milton Keynes shopping centre. Aware of Britain's often cynical attitude to new-age inventions, and the relative safety of group eccentricity, Makaya has chosen to spread the ElliptiGO gospel through a weekly club. It's here, round the back of Tesco Extra, where a dozen cardio trailblazers meet three times a week. The

group includes a footballer, gym-phobic fitness freaks, a couple of runners and a middle-aged man called Gerrard who has finally discovered a form of exercise that doesn't inflame his troublesome ankle.

Although it feels alien initially, riding an ElliptiGO soon feels natural. There's not much of a learning curve, especially if you've used an elliptical trainer in a gym. But while the technique is easy, the same can't be said for the effort. When you see someone on an ElliptiGO it looks so easy that one of the group tells me a friend was convinced the bikes have small motors on the back. They don't.

The pleasing discovery about the ElliptiGO is that it *is* hard work. Use the gears as intended and

you can push your body quite hard, and when you're with someone as enthusiastic as Makaya, you have little choice. Which is how I find myself scaling the mightiest peak in north

Buckinghamshire.

I actually find the hills far tougher than if I had run up them. The ElliptiGO's gears should be doing a lot of the work, but I struggle to master them. I like to switch off when I run and just disappear into the great outdoors – even if it's Tottenham High Road on a dank Sunday morning – and that's something you can't do when you've got to think about gears, brakes and traffic. There's also the standard of British roadways. ElliptiGO's utopian promotional videos are filmed in San Diego, where the sun always shines and the roads are endless stretches of faultless tarmac. Back in MK, UK, the perils of potholes, sleeping policemen and wonky drain covers are a concern for anyone on two wheels. These difficulties aside, ElliptiGO riding is great fun. And fast. How else would I 'run' a 3:43 mile?

'I'm hooked because I find ElliptiGO exhilarating,' says one of our merry band, Julie Williams, an MK Lakeside club runner training for her first marathon.

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Go on, have a 'GO

Rowhire, Nationwide

National hire scheme £24.95 per week, minimum of three months (rowhire.co.uk)

Cyclopark, Kent

ElliptiGOs available to hire at purpose-built cycle park (cyclopark.com)

Park Cycle, London

Ride around Richmond Park from £12 per hour (parkcycle.co.uk)

Milton Keynes ElliptiGO Club, Bucks

£50 for year membership, then £10 per week or £12 for one-off session (facebook.com/MiltonKeynesElliptiGOclub)

Fitso Fitness, Brighton, East Sussex

Personal trainer sessions from £35. (fitsofitness.co.uk)

Impact Free Fitness, London

Sessions in groups of eight. £85 for 10. (impactfreefitness.co.uk)



BEST OF BOTH WORLDS Go for a run and enjoy the ride – and all the training perks



The models

All three bikes have drive arms, aluminium frames and adjustable foot platforms



3C £1,599

Entry-level option with three gears. OK if you're prepared to avoid hills.



8C £1,999

The biggest seller features eight gears, which give you freedom to cover hills and add resistance/speed on the flat.



11R £2,999

An 11-speed model designed for ultra-endurance events and elite athletes. All available from elliptigo.co.uk



STREET VALUE Experience the elliptical trainer in the great outdoors



Illustration: Sudden Impact Media

'It's also increased my endurance, and I've shaved two minutes off my 5K PB since I started using it.' And she feels other benefits, too. 'At 54, I need something without impact,' she says. 'Last night I ran 10 miles, and I really feel it in my hips, but when I do 18 miles on the ElliptiGO I feel nothing. The recovery is almost instant.'

It's this aspect that has attracted ultra runners like Karnazes. Tests show his superhuman ability to suppress lactic acid, but he's not immune to the effects of pounding the earth for hours on end. With an ElliptiGO he can cover mind-boggling distances while radically reducing the toll on his body. According to Augello the simple maths of longer training time for lower repair cost adds up to inevitable performance improvements. 'You're faster and more efficient,' he says.

My four sessions aren't enough to fully gauge the long-term effects, but it's easy to see the benefits. Makaya is eager for me to replicate Karnazes' stacked training sessions, so I follow two hours of ElliptiGO with an hour-long run. Although I've been on my feet for three hours, it doesn't feel like it. The same ease comes with an 8x400m interval session around a park. I start to wonder if it feels just a little *too* painless.

Hirofumi Tanaka, an exercise physiologist at the University of Texas, found that only one factor matters in terms of performance: training in that sport. 'You can maintain your cardiovascular capacity by cross-training, but it is very hard to maintain your performance. This is because you are violating the principle of the specificity of training.'

Ready for riding the 'hood?

There's also the matter of 'profile'. When you're running, unless you've opted for leopardskin lycra or Dave Bedford-style tash and vest combo, you can generally plod around without attracting undue

attention. It's rather different on an ElliptiGO. You may as well have a neon sign blazing out the word 'BERK' above your head.

'I get some very funny looks when I'm out,' says ElliptiGO owner Jackie Newton, a 2:47 marathoner who has represented GB in the Half Marathon World Championships. 'I don't think there are any other users in Stockport. I've had cars slow down or pull over.' But Newton feels the funny looks are well worth it. 'When I first saw it I was cynical too,' she says. 'But I was at a stage where I couldn't run the miles I wanted to anymore. It was the motion that sold me, because it is a running action. I still run, but when I have a niggle, using the ElliptiGO means I can still train and push myself. If you pick up the pace or hit the hills you can really work hard. I'm addicted; I don't think I could go back to just running.'

I'm certainly convinced that the ElliptiGO can help your running if you're trying to stave off, or come back from, injury. 'Meb Keflezighi and Lauren Fleshman both set PBs after periods of injury where they did no running, just ElliptiGO training,' Makaya tells me. 'It is possible to run well after a layoff if you keep the running muscles fit using impact-free training. The gym is one option, but clocking hours on an indoor elliptical requires superhuman patience. Riding outdoors on the ElliptiGO is like running; it never gets boring.'

So there it is again: the wind in your hair, the runner's high. But there's the thing: it is *like* running' but it's not *actually* running because nothing can be as free, as simple and life-affirming as just closing the door and running wherever your feet take you. However, if you're injured, if your joints are beginning to complain or if you want to tweak your training then this bizarre contraption could be the solution. Just be ready to explain to people what it is. ☺