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# Getting Fit Glued To The Tube

The sporting goods biz is using video games to pry potatoes off the couch



SLIDE SHOW >>

Brian Willis is expertly steering an all-terrain vehicle up hills and around obstacles on the screen in front of him, leaving his competitors in the dust. But the 41-year-old self-professed "video gamer" is not sitting on a couch. He's pedaling furiously on a stationary bike, sweat dripping from his brow.

To win the ATV Offroad Fury game, Willis, an Internet security maven at Intel Corp. ([INTC](#)) in Seattle, pedals faster and faster, getting a great workout. "You lose yourself in the game," he says. Over the past year he has trimmed 120 pounds from a body that had ballooned nearly to 500. He can fly-fish again and is close to fitting back into his surfing wet suit. "I feel really good getting back to the things I love," he says.

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In Naperville, Ill., near Chicago, Phil Lawler, 56, is pacing the gym at Madison Junior High, overseeing 35 rambunctious eighth-graders. No dodgeball here. Some kids are dancing up a storm, stepping on a mat as they follow the directions of big arrows on a screen in a game called Dance Dance Revolution. Others play

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video games on exercise bicycles. Still others throw balls against a "Sportwall," trying to hit lights as they blink.

There's no mystery about why America's youth are getting fatter and less fit, says the Iowa-born Lawler, a cancer survivor and tireless advocate for physical fitness: "Blame screen time -- TVs, computers, video games. But the best way to destroy your enemy is to make him your friend. So we are making this interactive exercise our friend, and boy, are the kids hooked on it." While he has no historical data for comparison, in the 21 schools that Lawler oversees, 3% of children are overweight, vs. a national rate near 20%. "Every school should be offering what we are doing," he says.

Flash back six years. The president of Wilson Sporting Goods, Jim Baugh, is contemplating the decline in Americans' participation, almost across the board, in sports and physical activities. Tennis, down 22% between 1987 and 2000. Baseball, down 28%. Aerobics, off 60%. The future looked bleak for the sporting goods industry, Baugh realized. More important, the nation itself was in a growing health crisis, with rising rates of obesity and related diseases such as diabetes. "I saw the trends and said: 'Oh my God, America is forgetting that we need active bodies for active minds,'" Baugh recalls.

He jawboned the industry into creating an organization to reform phys ed, called PE4Life. The goal: to create new generations of fitter Americans -- who would buy more tennis rackets, baseball bats, and other gear. The group has turned gym classes in hundreds of schools into hotbeds of experimentation. One of its gurus is Phil Lawler, who trains other teachers in a PE4Life academy.

But that's just one part of a larger effort by the industry to turn back the tide. The main weapon: technology. Kids are already hooked on computers and video games. "But we can trick them into exercising," says Richard Kentopp, CEO of Source Distributors Inc., distributors for Japanese bicycle accessory maker CatEye Co. Kentopp started selling \$1,169 or \$1,699 GameBikes, which act as controllers for PlayStation or other games, in 2004. "It is truly a huge market and huge opportunity," says Cathi Lamberti, CEO of Sportwall International, which is jumping in with a competing product and envisions such "game" bikes becoming fixtures in health clubs, schools, and medical centers.

When Icon Health & Fitness Inc., with a 55% share of the \$3 billion-a-year treadmill market, added TVs to its products this spring, the TV machines outsold the old kind 2 to 1. The treadmills come with programs that enable homebound walkers to trek though California's redwoods or across Hawaii's beaches.

Companies big and small are jumping on the technology bandwagon, trying to grab part of the \$5.2 billion fitness products market. You can steer through the Alps on VCycling's new virtual reality trainer, created by Buzz Gardner, a retired financial planner turned entrepreneur. You can insert yourself in video games with Sony Corp.'s (SNE) EyeToy, where your movements control the on-screen character, and which has sold millions since being introduced in 2003. You can "fly" a jet fighter by pushing and pulling on a control stick from Powergrid Fitness Inc., or swing a baseball bat or box with Jackie Chan on your TV with XaviX' active game system, with sales in the hundreds of thousands since a 2004 launch.

Pro teams like the National Football League's Denver Nuggets, as well as schools and rehab centers, have embraced the Makoto arena, where players hit targets on three towers when bells sound and lights flash. The Konami Corp. (KNM) arcade game that became a craze in Japan, Dance Dance Revolution, is catching on in schools and has been installed along with GameBikes at two pilot gyms in McDonald's (MCD) restaurants.

The companies are looking to make money, of course, "but we really do have very noble and altruistic goals about wanting people to be fit," says Colleen Logan, Icon vice-president for marketing.

Whatever companies' motives, the nation's lack of physical activity is being linked to a host of health problems. And new studies show that learning may suffer as

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well. Research on exercise is one of the hottest areas of neuroscience right now, says Dr. John J. Ratey, associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School: "The effect of physical activity on the brain is huge."

John Stevens, 53, school superintendent in Grundy Center, Iowa, is a believer. His district has enthusiastically embraced the PE4Life model. Kids use the new high-tech exercise games, and teachers chart their progress in measures like cardiovascular fitness and body composition as rigorously as their math scores. "In the past two years our school has been the state champion in the academic decathlon, and last year we won the 'all-sports' award in Iowa," says Stevens. "That's more than a coincidence. We have all kinds of evidence that exercise is good for kids academically."

One key technology: heart rate monitors. When Iowa PE teacher Beth Kirkpatrick first began to use the devices, she found that "the standard approach to teaching PE was dead wrong." The kids were hardly getting any exercise. But the monitors helped grab even the exercise-phobes, and each kid was able to make progress at his or her own level. And with activities tailored to individual abilities, they were motivated to work far harder.

Polar, the leading heart rate monitor company, hired Kirkpatrick to head up a division aimed at the school market. The Lake Success (N.Y.) company's products are now used by children in 10,000 schools in the U.S. And "hopefully they will be Polar customers for life," says Gina Pilnacek, marketing manager for Polar's education division.

The approach seems to motivate adults, too. Former Wilson President and PE4Life founder Jim Baugh is now president of the Tennis Industry Assn. With grass-roots programs such as "cardio-tennis," he has boosted tennis participation by 10% since 2005, the only major sport not to suffer continuing declines.

Of course, no one expects technology to turn a nation of couch potatoes into one of athletes or fitness buffs. After all, basements and garages are full of barely used NordicTracks or treadmills. Skeptics wonder if virtual reality and "active" video gaming will even make a dent in the problem. Just throwing in technology doesn't mean people will exercise more, cautions Kim B. Blair, director of the Center for Sports Innovation at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. But it can help ease the learning curve for challenging sports like golf, he says. In fact, he has founded a company, iClub, to market an MIT-designed sensor-studded club that records and analyzes precise details in players' swings.

The central challenge is today's sedentary world. "I rode my bike to school, then played in the woods with my buddies after doing chores," recalls Kentopp, 56. With today's highly protective parents, "you can't do that anymore."

Out in Redlands, Calif., Ernie Medina Jr., a doctor of public health, is betting that one solution to the problems of this new world is his XRtainment Zone, a commercial facility crammed with GameBikes, Makoto arenas, Sportwalls, and other equipment. It had its grand opening on Sept. 14. "We are trying to get people who don't exercise," he says. "We call it stealth exercising."

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