

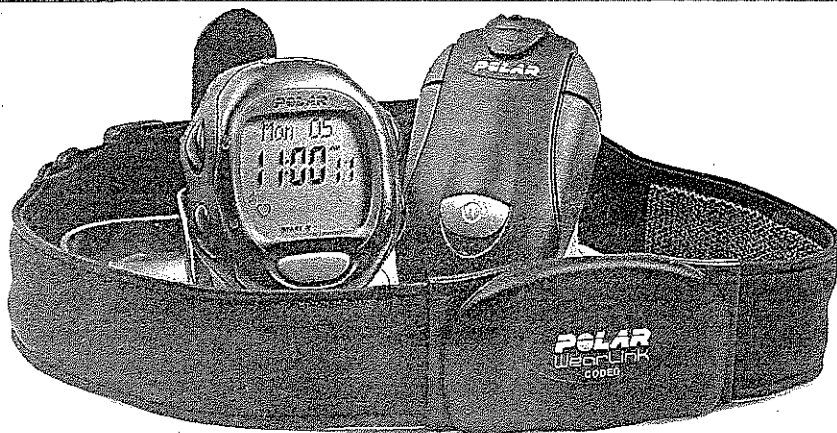
CATALOG CRITIC

The Watches That Watch You

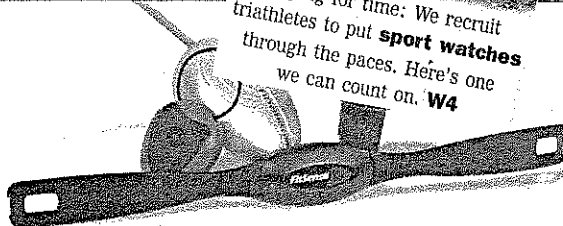
Catalog Critic

Playing for time: We recruit triathletes to put sport watches through the paces. Here's one we can count on. W4

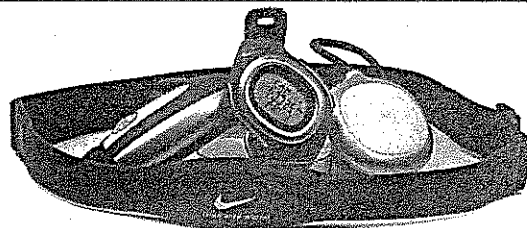
POLAR BEST OVERALL



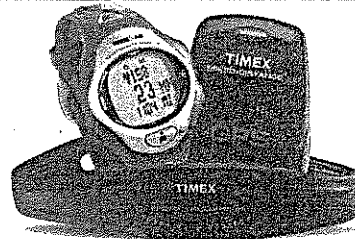
FITSENSE



NIKE



TIMEX



GARMIN BEST VALUE



THESE DAYS, more people are bringing a training coach along with them on their workouts—it's just that their coach is strapped to their wrist.

A host of companies is making watches that tell wearers not only what time it is, but how fast their heart is beating, how far they've traveled and how fast they've been going, whether they're running, biking and sometimes even swimming. These wrist-top exercise computers have been around for a few years, and by 2003, they had become more widely available from sports-watch makers FitSense and Polar, plus Nike and even Timex. In 2004, the sport-watch category had become a \$60 million business, according to market-research company Sports Scan.

With swimsuit season just around the corner, we decided to examine five multisport watches, testing them with a team of triathletes coached by Scott Willett, who runs TriLife Coaching in New York City and has competed in more than 150 triathlons. Besides our own testing, our five testers put the watches through their paces during two weeks of training for the Ironman Lake Placid, logging almost 300 miles of swim, bike and run per person.

This latest batch of sport watches has evolved a great deal from simple stopwatches. Not only do they display heart rates, reading heartbeats from an included chest strap, they also can calculate speed and distance. Some models use GPS satellites to determine your position, others use a device that attaches to your foot and measures stride. In addition, they all allow you to upload that data to a PC for more-complex analysis.

Interrupted Program

Timex's Bodylink 5E671, which cost us \$300, was easier to program than some of the others and we liked the fit, even during the swim. We did, however, experience some minor spottiness with its satellite reception while training in New York City's Central Park. The \$369 Nike Triax Elite had so many

STORE/PRICE/PHONE

Polar
S625X
\$369.99
800-961-3030
www.paragonsports.com

Garmin
Forerunner 301
\$299.95
800-426-4840
www.rei.com

FitSense
FS-1 Speedometer
\$249.99
508-303-8811
www.fitsense.com

Nike
Triax Elite HRM/SDM
\$369.00
800-595-6453
www.nike.com

Timex
Bodylink 5E671
\$300, 800-448-4639
www.timex.com

QUALITY

Best Overall. Can view three lines of data on one screen, so you don't have to toggle...

Best Value. The GPS function worked flawlessly and is built into the watch.

Large face can display plenty of info; and it's easy to program, but watch was fairly big and uncomfortable.

Watch had many functions but toggling between the various screens proved difficult when running.

Bulky cassette-taped GPS unit must be worn on arm or attached to a belt.

SHIPPING COST/TIME

Two-day shipping cost was \$9.99; package arrived on time.

Overnight-air cost was \$22.95; package arrived on time.

Three-day ground shipping cost was \$15.95; product arrived on time.

Two-day air cost was \$11; package arrived on time.

Free ground shipping took three days.

RETURN POLICY

Return within 30 days for refund. You pay shipping unless product is faulty, or return to store.

Product can be returned for a refund at any time. You pay shipping, or return to store.

For refund within 30 days. Contact FitSense for return authorization. You pay shipping.

For a refund or exchange within 30 days. You pay shipping or return to Nike-town locations.

For refund within 30 days as long as it's not worn or overused; buyer pays shipping.

PHONE/WEB EXPERIENCE

Hard to find specific product on Web site. We searched via brand and by the specific product name.

We had to call tech support with a couple questions; and they spent almost an hour walking us through the steps.

Web site was easy to navigate, and ordering was quick and efficient.

Web site failed at credit-card phase; phone support was particularly helpful with product questions.

Web site failed during ordering, but customer support was very helpful with the transaction.

COMMENT

The heart-rate monitor strap's "soft" casing was more comfortable than others we tested (especially for our female testers).

The GPS will map and record your favorite workout routes; the next version of software will allow the device to be converted from run to bike functions in one touch.

The unique side-mounted viewing screen makes it easy to read. The alarms were a bit difficult to hear in heavy urban traffic.

Our female testers found the Nike heart-rate strap to be less comfortable than other brands.

The Bodylink is sturdy: Ours took a licking (our clumsy tester hit a number of fixed objects while wearing the watch), but it kept on ticking.

features that we had to toggle between various screens to get back to the readings we wanted to see. The FitSense FS-1, at \$250, was easy to read and straightforward in how it worked. However, the watch was quite large, so we had to strap it tightly to the wrist to keep it from moving. We also found the tight plastic connections of its heart-rate monitor uncomfortable.

The Garmin Forerunner 301's enormous face made us feel, at first, like we were on an episode of "Star Trek," but our older eyes grew to rely on this easy-to-read feature. We also liked that the GPS unit is embedded in the \$300 device (the Bodylink has a separate GPS module). "This unit really stands out—both on your wrist and in performance," said Coach Willett. It's our Best Value.

Polar's \$370 S625X displayed the specific data we wanted to see on a single screen (no toggling), was the only watch in our test with a heart monitor that worked flawlessly underwater, and was the most comfortable of the bunch. "There were times I couldn't even tell I had the heart-rate transmitter on," said one of our testers. It's our Best Overall. —Peter Hyman