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HEALTH BEAT: FITNESS

Equipment -- without the dumbbells and whistles

By Roy M. Wallack, Tribune newspapers: Special to the Los Angeles Times

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This is the time of year when thousands of people resolve to start weight training, only to realize that they can't stand the sight of dumbbells. That's why we made sure that none of the simple, innovative, compact strength products reviewed here looks like one. But don't be fooled: They'll build and tone muscle quite well -- and do it in a fun, functional and flexible way that will keep your inner Arnold pumped all year long.

With a little curve

SmartBells: Curved, 11-by-9-inch oval weight plate with two large cutouts for your hands; used for full-body, strength and stretching exercises.



Likes: Allows for a strength-and-flexibility workout that's unique, lowstress and invigorating. Great way for non-exercisers to get a full-body workout and for hardcores to get (at the very least) a tough warm-up. The curved shape encourages you to lift and rotate it around your head, arms and legs -- even whip it between your legs like a showboating basketball player -- in sweeping, flowing arcs that make the exercises seem easier than they are. The difficulty increases with the weight; SmartBells are available in a plastic 1.2-pound version (suitable for the elderly); the standard red-coated, 4.5-pound aluminum model; and a black, pig-iron 12-pounder (for athletic types). Includes clear plastic stand, DVD and wall chart.

Dislikes: The standard "Basics" DVD is good but provides only about 14 total minutes of exercises; DVDs with tougher challenges are sold separately. Hard-core exercisers looking for a pronounced strength effect will have to wait for heavier "Performance Bells" of 18, 24, 36 and 48 pounds debuting in February.

Price: \$69.99; 800-500-2030; smartbells.com.

Working the core

Valeo Tanker 5 >25: A two-handled, hard plastic, adjustable-weight, 13-by-9 1/2-inch medicine ball that you can fill with sand or water. Empty, it weighs 5 pounds; filled, 17.5 pounds (water) and 28 pounds

(sand).

Likes: Unique, all-body strength/flexibility workout or warm-up, similar to SmartBells but with more challenge and less comfort and fluidity. Combines a two-fisted grip with the bulk of a kettle bell, then adds an internal side-to-side sloshing of water or sand that forces your core to work harder to stabilize the load. The range of weights will satisfy everyone from novices to Adonises. Several unusual core- and coordination-building exercises are possible, including cross-body chops, golf swings, even push-ups. The DVD's dozen instructional exercises make a solid 12-minute workout. Includes an exercise wall chart (that oddly includes only eight of the above exercises).

Dislikes: The DVD isn't long enough and lacks a true workout routine (you have to double up on the 12-minute instructions). Beware: You may stub your toe on the rocklike plastic, and the wrench used to cinch the cap tight will be easy to lose.

Price: \$49.99; 800-634-2704; valeofit.com.

Simple but effective

Lebert Equalizer: Twin free-standing supports, made of 28-inch-tall steel tubes with foam handle grips in the middle, allow a variety of exercises.

Likes: Surprisingly effective, even for hardcore athletes. My initial skepticism over the bare-bones devices disappeared with an opportunity to do real dips, push-ups, one-legged squats, knee-raises and weird but hard supine pull-ups. A laminated chart offers several more body-weight exercises, stretches, even an upright row (using one support as the weight). Easy, 20-minute assembly consists of screwing in eight Allen bolts; wrench included.

Dislikes: None.

Price: \$99; 905-785-0626; lebertequalizer.com.

Something to hold on to

Harbinger Weighted Fitness Ball With

Strap: Sand-filled ball of soft PVC plastic with a Velcro strap to hold it to hand or foot.

Likes: More useful than a similar-weighted dumbbell. That's because, in addition to a variety of core and upperbody exercises, these 6-, 8- or 10-pound balls also can be used for leg exercises (adductor/abductor, curl and extension). It's also much safer than metal dumbbells because it doesn't hurt when it drops on your big toe. Can be held in one or two hands.

Dislikes: The weights are non-adjustable and too light for dedicated gym rats.

Price: \$20 (6 pounds), \$25 (8 pounds), \$30 (10 pounds). Available only from retailers; prices will vary; 800-729-5954; harbingerfitness.com.

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