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Arthur Jones, 80, Exercise Machine Inventor, Dies

By ANDREW MARTIN

Arthur Jones, a wild-animal enthusiast, filmmaker and entrepreneur whose Nautilus fitness machines helped to transform the fitness industry and the way ordinary people exercise, died on Tuesday at his home in Ocala, Fla. He was 80.

Mr. Jones died of natural causes, his son William Edgar Jones said.

Mr. Jones was a rough-and-tumble character who had six wives, a nearly lifelong smoking habit and an affection for exotic animals like rattlesnakes and crocodiles, which he kept at his farm, the younger Mr. Jones said.

He tinkered with exercise equipment for more than 20 years before creating his first Nautilus machine, called the Blue Monster, in the late 1960s. Mr. Jones presented the equipment at a Mr. America contest in California and started Arthur Jones Productions to sell the equipment. The company's name was later changed to Nautilus, because the cam, or gear, that was crucial to the machine's success resembled a nautilus.

Mr. Jones' invention led to the "machine environment" that is prevalent today in health clubs. The company grew rapidly, and the machines helped to transform dank gyms filled with free weights and hulking men into fashionable fitness clubs popular with recreational athletes.

"It really took us out of the Stone Ages," said John Wildman, interim chief marketing officer and senior vice president at Bally Total Fitness, the nation's largest health club chain. "When it was just dumbbells and barbells, the perception of the industry was it was just power lifters and bodybuilders."

What made the Nautilus machine unique for the time was that the amount of weight being moved changed during the course of one repetition of an exercise, making the workout more efficient.

Mr. Wildman said the innovation made the barbell antiquated. "Now, with one of these machines," he said, "you could do a bench press that was better than the bench press you could do with a free weight."

Mr. Jones sold his interest in Nautilus in 1986, and the company is now based in Vancouver, Wash.

By creating a machine that accommodated human movements, Mr. Jones revolutionized how people exercise, said Greg Webb, a Nautilus vice president of product development, who started working with Mr. Jones in 1977.

“The idea of a health club really changed,” Mr. Webb said. “It became big business. It was Arthur Jones that started that.”

Arthur A. Jones was born in 1926 in Arkansas and was reared in Oklahoma. His son William said that Mr. Jones, whose parents were doctors, never finished high school but left home and did odd jobs.

He served in the Navy in World War II, his son said.

From early in his life, Mr. Jones was enamored of animals. He tracked big game in Africa and ran an import-export business for wild animals, flying the animals himself in old B-25 bombers, his son said.

Mr. Jones began filming some of the animals and eventually had a wildlife television show. The younger Mr. Jones recalled that in the mid-1960s, the whole family moved to Africa, where his father worked on several movies, including “Savage,” which Arthur Jones wrote and produced.

The Nautilus business grew from its Florida home, and Mr. Jones eventually bought a sprawling farm near Ocala where he kept his airplanes and an assortment of wild animals, including elephants, snakes, alligators, crocodiles and a gorilla named Mickey.

In addition to his son William, he is survived by another son, Gary, and two daughters, Eva Jones and Joyce, whose last name was not available.

Mr. Jones once said, according to his son, “I shot 630 elephants and 63 men, and I regret the elephants more.”

The younger Mr. Jones said he thought there might have been some truth to his father’s sometimes outrageous statements. “You didn’t argue with the man,” he said. “Not twice.”