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Arthur Jones; Revolutionized Exercise Industry

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Arthur Jones, 80, the swashbuckling inventor of Nautilus exercise equipment, which revolutionized strength training by replacing the dead weight of barbells with a variable resistance technique, died Aug. 28 at his home in Ocala, Fla. No cause of death was reported.

Gruff and profane, Mr. Jones did not fit the image of the creator of the machines used by svelte, leotard-wearing exercise enthusiasts. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and ill-fitting pants. He spent his early life hunting big game for zoos and collectors. He made television shows and a movie, all geared to outdoors adventure.

It was his invention of the Nautilus that made his fortune and reshaped the world's physique. It took bodybuilding out of the subculture of dank gyms and bulging muscles and ushered in an era that brought sedentary office workers into brightly lit fitness centers.

The creation was born of frustration. Living in the Tulsa YMCA in 1948, he routinely became irritated when the barbells and exercise regimes then in vogue failed to give him the big muscles he sought.

"I ended up with the arms and legs of a gorilla on the body of a spider monkey," he told Forbes magazine in 1983. "I figured there was something wrong with the exercise tool."

One day, instead of quitting when he reached a plateau, he cut his routine in half and was surprised to see results. Deducing that muscles need rest to recover and that leverage affects strength, he began experimenting. He introduced his product in 1970 at a Los Angeles weight-lifting convention and dubbed it the Nautilus, after the nautilus seashell, which resembles the kidney-shaped cam that was his breakthrough development.

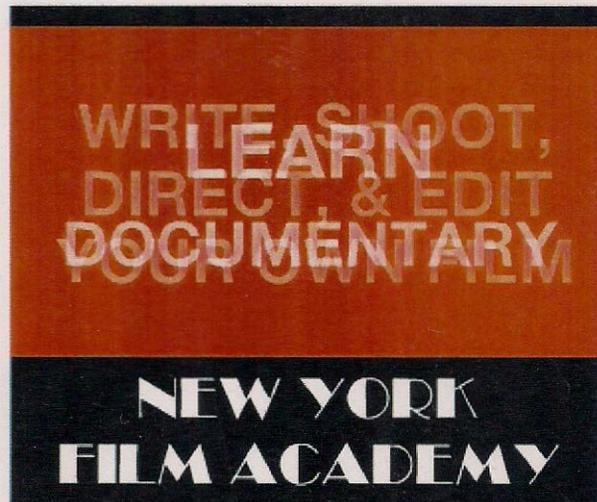
The machines and the company he formed to sell them made him a multimillionaire and landed him on the Forbes 400 list. At one point, financial analysts estimated that Nautilus was grossing \$300 million annually.

With his new wealth, Mr. Jones bought 600 acres of north Florida property to house a private zoo containing 90 elephants, three rhinoceroses, a gorilla, 300 alligators, 400 crocodiles and three used Boeing 707 airliners. He founded a "fly-in" community in Ocala called Jumbolair Aviation Estates, whose most famous resident is actor John Travolta.

But Mr. Jones's flamboyant personality didn't play so well in the business world. In 1984, Adweek magazine said he spent \$4.2 million on an ad campaign as a purported ploy to avoid making a profit and paying taxes. The Internal Revenue Service indicted him in 1981 with failing to pay federal income taxes in the 1970s.

As many as six former business partners and distributors accused him of threatening to kill them after disputes, which incurred a spate of lawsuits from distributors and retail accounts. Other distributors accused Nautilus of

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failing to ship merchandise they had paid for.

He also disastrously invested \$70 million in a video studio, dubbed the Nautilus Television Network, which produced a talk show starring his friend G. Gordon Liddy, the chief of the Watergate "plumbers." Mr. Jones also made a vanity TV program starring himself, dubbed "Younger Women, Faster Airplanes and Bigger Crocodiles," which was also his unofficial motto. He had hoped to package the programs on videodisks, a technology that bombed.

He sold his share in the Nautilus business and began experimenting with a new invention, intended to analyze and exercise lumbar muscles for those who have lower-back pain. That invention turned into the company MedX.

"This is the first machine that truly isolates the muscles of the lower back," he told Business Week magazine. "My competitors who say otherwise are liars or fools -- or both. Let them sue me. I can't wait." Suspicious of the competitors, whom he called "thieves, frauds, fakers, slanderers and incompetents," he often carried a Colt .45.

"I've shot 630 elephants and 63 men, and I regret the elephants more," he told reporters in the 1970s.

Born to a well-off family in Arkansas, he was the son of two doctors. He started running away from home at a young age and dropped out of school in ninth grade. "I should have dropped out in sixth grade," he told Forbes.

He rode the rails, he later told interviewers, until enlisting in the Navy during World War II and serving in the Pacific. After the war, he launched a zoo in Slidell, La.

Somewhere along the way, he learned to fly and began collecting exotic animals, which he ferried to zoos, pet stores and researchers. He claimed run-ins with agencies such as the CIA and FBI, which he said accused him of running guns or bombs to Cuba.

For 12 years, business thrived. He made a series of TV programs that aired as "Wild Cargo" in the United States. In the mid-1960s, he moved his family to Rhodesia, where they lived two years until the government took exception to his wild-game business and seized his assets, forcing his return to the United States.

He had never formally studied physiology, but one of his daughters told People magazine that he kept a freezer full of frozen human limbs for research. He acknowledged that his politics were to the right of Attila the Hun and, while living in a state plagued by drug runners, advocated killing drug users.

"When I was broke, I was crazy," he said. "Now that I am rich, I'm eccentric."

Mr. Jones married six women -- all 16 to 20 years old at the time -- and divorced them all. At least four children survive him.

He sold Nautilus in 1986 for \$23 million. He also sold MedX in 1996 and then retired. Among his other inventions were photographic vehicles and camera mounts and lenses.

"Specialization is for insects," he once snapped. "There is no limit to my abilities. I can do anything and do it well if I turn my mind to it."

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