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Economy & Business

Muscle Man

Nautilus is pumping profits

In the John Travolta film *Perfect*, which opens this week, the star once again plunges into the hottest craze. The movie takes place in a glittery jungle of Dankskins and weight-lifting machines, a Los Angeles health club whose members pursue the perfect pecs. No one could be more gratified by the sight of this new mating ritual than Arthur Jones, the inventor whose sophisticated Nautilus machines have turned body building into sweaty chic.

Since he sold the first machine in 1970, Jones has manufactured some 400,000 of the devices. The company he owns, Nautilus Sports/Medical Industries (estimated 1984 sales: \$300 million), has become the leading U.S. maker of exercise equipment. Jones, however, is even more extraordinary than his machine. No mild-mannered tinkerer, the gruff and often profane tycoon rules an unlikely empire that includes a menagerie of wild animals, two Boeing 707 jets and a \$70 million television studio.

Born in Arkansas and reared in Oklahoma, Jones claims he was precocious from the start and tried to run away from home at age eight. Although both his parents were doctors, he quit school in the ninth grade and began working at a variety of jobs from welding to piloting airliners to making wildlife films in Africa. "Specialization is for insects," he snaps today. "There is no limit to my abilities. I can do anything and do it well if I turn my mind to it."

For more than two decades, starting in 1948 in a Y.M.C.A. in Tulsa, Jones toyed with the idea of a better way to lift weights. While working out with barbells, he concluded that they are inefficient because they do not correctly apply resistance during an exercise. After many of Jones' experimental rigs failed, the machine that he finally displayed at a Los Angeles fitness show in 1970 solved the problem by employing oddly shaped pulleys that keep a variable amount of resistance on a person's muscles during an entire exercise motion.

Orders began pouring in for the machine, which Jones named for the resemblance of its pulleys to the outline of the nautilus, a type of shellfish. Devotees ranging from athletes to starlets claim that the Nautilus machine builds firm bodies with unbeatable speed. But skeptics say that Nautilus machines fail to give the heart much of a workout. In a report published in April, two researchers claimed that a Nautilus routine is no replacement for running, swimming and other aerobics.

Jones' product line has expanded like

the chest of an avid body builder. Last year Nautilus began selling machines for the home, priced at \$485. He now has 37 different models for fitness centers that go for an average \$2,640. Nautilus will launch a line of shoes and exercise wear early next year. But Jones' highest interest lies in medicine, to which he has donated some \$11 million for research. Next month doctors and clinics will begin receiving a new computerized Nautilus machine (price: \$30,000) that is designed to aid physical therapy by measuring strength.

The gravel-voiced Jones has none of the polish of his machines. He wears horn-rimmed glasses and ill-fitting pants, gulps coffee, chain-smokes Pall Malls and often



Jones, inset, and his 23-year-old wife Terri
 Turning body building into chic sweat.

totes a Colt .45. "When I was broke, I was crazy; now that I am rich, I am eccentric," he declares. He is about 65 but refuses to confirm it. His motto for summing up his favorite pursuits: "Younger women, faster airplanes and bigger crocodiles." Jones has had five wives, all of whom he married when they were between the ages of 16 and 20. He lives, with his current spouse Terri, 23, on his 600-acre Jumbo Lair spread near Ocala, Fla., which is also home to 90 elephants, three rhinos, a gorilla, 150 snakes, 300 alligators and 400 crocodiles. The animals come in handy for Jones' research projects, which he and his staff conduct with no particular goal. "If I knew what I was going to discover, I wouldn't do it," huffs Jones. "Very little in life happens according to plan." But with his growing fortune, Jones has plans that tend to happen. —By Stephen Koopp. Reported by Joseph J. Kane/Ocala