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The Least Likely Star to Emerge From 'House of Cards': A Rowing Machine

How the WaterRower found surprise success by taking abuse from Kevin Spacey on the Netflix show



Kevin Spacey's character on the Netflix series 'House of Cards' has helped make famous a little-known exercise machine, the WaterRower. *PHOTO: NETFLIX*

By RACHEL BACHMAN

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An obscure piece of exercise equipment has become an unlikely star.

The WaterRower, a rowing machine distinguished by a tire-shaped tank of water at its front, has gained fame through repeat appearances on the Netflix hit “House of Cards.”

Frank Underwood, the power-hungry politician played by Kevin Spacey, and his wife Claire, played by Robin Wright, retreat to the machine to burn off frustrations from their conniving exploits. The machine even surfaces in Mr. Underwood’s dreams.

Each time a new batch of episodes is released, Internet searches for “House of Cards rowing machine” spike. The searches reached their all-time peak in March, according to Google Trends. That’s when the show’s fourth season was released.

David Jones, director of sales and marketing for WaterRower, calls Mr. Spacey “the most famous ‘rower’ in the world.”



The fitness boutique chain Orangetheory is expanding rapidly, planning to open one location a day this year. It uses WaterRowers as part of its heart rate-based workouts. *PHOTO: ORANGETHEORY*

WaterRower’s Warren, R.I., factory has tripled its production capacity in five years to more than 1,000 machines a week, Mr. Jones says of the closely held company.

The machines are “one of the hottest products out there right now,” says Tonja Hadley, regional sales director for HealthStyles Exercise Equipment, a chain of six Colorado stores. “We can’t seem to keep them in stock.”

Rowing machines in general are gaining momentum as more people seek the kind of intensive, total-body workout that they offer. They work many muscle groups and raise the rower’s heart rate, but are easier on joints than running.

More than 10 million people used a rowing machine at least once in 2015 in the U.S., a 3% increase from the year before, according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association.

Equinox gym locations started offering classes featuring WaterRowers several years ago and the classes have spread to other gyms and university recreation centers. Rowing boutiques have sprung up in the Northeast and beyond.

Fitness chain Orangetheory launched in 2010 with WaterRowers as a central part of its intense heart rate-based classes. Orangetheory now has nearly 400 studios world-wide, and is on track to open a new location each day this year, says Ellen Latham, a company founder. Each location has about 12 to 15 WaterRowers, she says.



The CrossFit Games in Carson, Calif., use Concept2 rowing machines as part of its fitness competition. More than 10 million people in the U.S. used a rowing machine at least once last year, according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association. *PHOTO: CROSSFIT, INC*

A brand of rowing machine called Concept2 has been used in the CrossFit Games Open, an annual fitness challenge, since 2014, CrossFit Games director Dave Castro says. More than 300,000 people world-wide competed in the most recent Open, which allows people to compare scores online in several types of workouts.

Often, exercise equipment blends into the background of TV shows or movies, says Tina Nibbe, senior marketing manager for Minnesota-based exercise-equipment company Octane Fitness. The company usually turns down product-placement offers, she says. The expense of shipping and setting up the machines isn't always worth it, especially for smaller companies.

"Things that are a very standard piece of cardio equipment, I don't think people are making a connection," Ms. Nibbe says.

The WaterRower has been an exception. Its unusual-looking mechanism features a paddle that pulls through the water tank to provide resistance. It was designed by competitive rower John Duke. The company was founded in 1988. The machine was selling relatively modestly until commercial sales began picking up around 2012 as fitness clubs started using it in classes, Mr. Jones says.

“House of Cards” producers approached WaterRower and a few other equipment companies before the show’s 2013 launch. “Our design won them over,” says Mr. Jones. No money changed hands in the deal, he says.



WaterRower’s factory in Warren, R.I., has tripled production capacity in five years. *PHOTO: WATERROWER*

A representative from “House of Cards” said no one was available to speak about the rowing machine’s role on the show.

The machine has appeared in every season, according to TheTake, a New York-based company that identifies products from movies and TV shows.

New York’s Museum of Modern Art Design Store began selling the machine in late 2014, says Chay Costello, the store’s associate director of merchandising. It is the only piece of fitness equipment the store has stocked in Ms. Costello’s 16 years there.

Ms. Costello brought a WaterRower into the office to try. Co-workers immediately recognized it from the show. The rowing machine’s page on the MoMA store website invites potential buyers to “channel the unbending power and steely determination of Frank Underwood.”

"A lot of exercise equipment just looks really technical, really plasticky, not something you'd want to live with," Ms. Costello says. The WaterRower is "a beautiful object." It's \$1,500, or \$1,350 for MoMA members, and is among the top 25% best-selling items in the store, she says.

The machine has thrived despite taking an occasional beating from Mr. Underwood. The character calls it a "monstrosity" when he first sees it, but is seen in a later scene rowing as his wife watches. In a later episode, he yanks the handle off the machine, breaking it.

Companies often forbid such depictions on screen. During its negotiation with the show's representatives, WaterRower took a "leap of faith" and agreed to allow it, Mr. Jones says. "We exceeded what we ever thought we would have gotten from this relationship."

Jeremy Floto, a photographer and designer who lives in Brooklyn, N.Y., bought a WaterRower after seeing it on an early episode of "House of Cards." He loved the look of it and the fact that the machine can be tilted against the wall when not in use.

Mr. Floto hasn't watched the latest season of the show. But he and his wife, Cassandra Warner, still use their WaterRower often, he says.

"We love it," he says. "We put a podcast on the headphones and just row away."

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