

Review: GPS running watches offer improvements

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In this Feb. 13, 2011 photo, a marathon runner, attending the Mardi Gras Marathon, displays three GPS running aides, the Garmin Forerunner 110, left, the Timex Ironman Global Trainer, and the Garmin Forerunner 305, right. (AP Photo)

My accessories for last month's Mardi Gras Marathon in New Orleans included a pair of bead necklaces and three watches.

No, I wasn't seeking a triple reminder that I was sluggish. Rather, these watches had GPS receivers and gave me information continuously on how fast and how far I was going. That allowed me to adjust my pace along the way in the hope of hitting my target finish time (emphasis on hope).

All three models showed a lot of improvement over the first GPS running devices I tried in 2003.

Although many frustrations remain, especially when using them in New York and other cities where tall buildings block the GPS signals, the devices have come down enough in price that they ought to be part of every runner's arsenal, as the days get longer and warmer for outdoor running.

As for the beads, my advice is to leave them in the hotel.

Garmin Forerunner 110 (\$200, \$250 with [heart-rate](#) monitor).

Consider this GPS lite. The device is small, with limited functionality, but you get value for the price. It's a good choice if you want something really simple to use.

Furthermore, it was consistently the best of the three I tried at locating a [GPS signal](#). That's because it remembers where the [GPS satellites](#) were the last time you used it. Presuming you haven't switched cities since then, the 110 doesn't have to start from scratch each time it starts trying to find a signal.

Even in New York, where GPS devices have more trouble locking in signals because of the buildings, I sometimes get a reading as soon as I'm out the door.

The watch gives you your time, distance and either average pace or speed, and that's it.

The device does store all your data, including the exact route of your run and mile-by-mile splits if you've turned the auto-lap feature on. But you need to connect the watch to a computer with the provided cable in order

to read them, something relatively easy to do. The other two units I tried let you review your splits right from the device, in addition to the computer option.

The 110 also triggers its power-save mode rather quickly. I turn on all three units several minutes before the start of my races to ensure that the devices have enough time to locate GPS signals. But at Mardi Gras and other races before it, the 110 often turned itself off before the race began.

As annoying as that may be, Garmin told me that was by design. The 110 looks the most like a regular watch, and Garmin figures people will wear it throughout the day. For that reason, it doesn't have an off button - and thus needs the automatic power save. Without it, the watch lasts just eight hours before needing a recharge.

For the same price, you can get the Forerunner 210, which lets you choose current pace instead of average pace. You can also view splits right from the watch, without having to transfer the information first.

Timex Ironman Global Trainer (\$300, \$360 with heart-rate monitor).

This device is far better than previous GPS running watches from Timex. But it largely plays catch-up with Garmin's GPS devices.

The Global Trainer is water resistant and has programmable settings for biking and swimming, allowing you to easily switch among them during a triathlon. Garmin's Forerunner 310XT, which I reviewed in 2009, had all this a year before the Global Trainer came out.

Previous Timex systems had two parts - a GPS receiver worn around the arm near the shoulder, and a watch that took data from it wirelessly and spat out pace and distance information. The Global Trainer combines all

that into one wrist-worn unit and gives you more options for displaying data.

For example, you can display up to four data points simultaneously, choosing from such attributes as time of day, pace, distance and time elapsed. You can also throw in your heart rate, altitude or estimate of calories burned.

Garmin allowed you to do that kind of customization and more ever since its first model came out in 2003, not long after Timex introduced the running community to GPS technology with its Bodylink System.

Of the three devices I tested, the Global Trainer seemed to have the most difficulty finding a GPS signal, whether in New York, New England or Germany. Timex says newer software that comes with the units on sale now should help, but the Global Trainer still lacks the 110's ability to remember your last position.

Rather than function as a regular stopwatch until it found such a signal, the Timex device kept annoying me with prompts I had to continually respond to while on the run. The Garmin devices knew to leave me alone.

The Global Trainer also stopped working when the memory was full, rather than erase my older workouts. It ran into that problem trying to squeeze in three marathons in a week. My advice is to bring a laptop to transfer older data online - or don't run three marathons in a week.

Where the Global Trainer wins is in price. It's \$50 cheaper than Garmin's 310XT, or \$40 cheaper with the heart-rate monitor. It's more expensive than the 110, but it does a lot more. It's a good choice for multisport athletes who live in places with a clear view of the sky.

Garmin Forerunner 305 (\$200 with heart-rate monitor).

This model is a few years old, but I include it because it's a good watch now that its price has come down. Although it's listed at \$200, deals are widely available online. A few retailers were selling them Wednesday for less than \$130. The 305 includes a heart-rate monitor, which usually costs \$50 more.

You don't get the 110's assistance in locating GPS signals, but you do get the flexibility and customization now available with the Timex watch. And I've found data on the 305 to be far easier to read than on the Timex device, especially on the run.

I recommend the 305 if you want to balance functionality and value. You're not getting the latest and the greatest, but you're getting something that works well at a good price.

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