

Review: Nike device improves, but oversimplified

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The Nike's SportWatch GPS, photographed Thursday, Oct. 27, 2011, in New York, uses signals from GPS satellites to calculate distance and speed as you run. It's a simplified device with only a limited number of features, but it works exceptionally well in big cities, where tall buildings often block signals. (AP Photo/Nick Jesdanun) ¶

(AP) -- Since 2003, I've tried several fitness accessories that use the GPS system to tell you how far and how fast you're running. I've generally liked them, except for the fact that they don't work well in big cities.

Many [runners](#) I know have one of these devices - usually a watch that gets signals from [GPS satellites](#) in the sky to calculate distance and

speed. These don't offer street maps, the way GPS devices in cars do, but some models have rudimentary navigation features to help get you back to your starting point. Some also try to coach you - they'll beep when you're going faster or slower than your specified [target](#).

Nike's \$200 SportWatch GPS doesn't offer that. What you get instead is a simplified device that works exceptionally well in big cities, including my hometown New York.

The problem with big cities is that tall buildings block some of the GPS signals. It might take 10 or 15 minutes for a device to find the signals, rather than just a minute or so elsewhere. As the [weather](#) gets colder, I'd prefer starting my run sooner and spending less time standing around outside waiting for the watch to activate.

The SportWatch addresses these shortcomings in two important ways.

As long as you plug the watch in to a computer regularly, using a standard [USB port](#), it retrieves data that can help locate signals faster.

It also has a [backup system](#) when no signal is available at all. The SportWatch comes with a small sensor that attaches to your shoe and measures the amount of time between footsteps and the time your foot is on the ground. The SportWatch picks up that information wirelessly and uses it to calculate pace and distance.

With this backup, you can start your run before the SportWatch finds the GPS signals. The device works even when you're running through a tunnel or on the lower level of a bridge - places GPS can't always reach. The SportWatch automatically goes back to using the more accurate [GPS system](#) once it gets signals again.

Unfortunately, the backup sensor system is designed specifically for

Nike shoes, which have slots built into them to hold the sensors. Runners can be quite particular about their shoes, and wrong ones can lead to injuries, as I've learned the hard way.

The good news is that many running stores sell Velcro attachments for other shoes, though you won't find out about them in Nike's manuals. I've found in years of testing that these third-party attachments don't work as well as Nike shoes, but a new auto-calibration feature should reduce the errors in calculating distance and pace.

The SportWatch, which incorporates a GPS receiver made by TomTom, has clear improvements over earlier models from Nike and others, though I stop short of giving it a ringing endorsement.

I find that it tries to simplify too much and allows for little customization.

Many of the settings can't be changed directly from the watch. You have to create an online account and download free software from Nike to make such adjustments from a computer.

You also have to go online for details about runs you've just completed. Lots of data get recorded during your runs, but the device only presents a sliver. You get distance, average pace, the time it took and estimated calories burned (as long as you went into the computer settings and entered your weight). You also get how long it took for each split - a point you manually record by tapping the watch's screen, be it the completion of a lap around a track or the hitting of a mile marker in a race.

But the SportWatch doesn't give you pace, distance and calorie information for each split, as many other devices do. Nor does it give you elevation and other metrics on the watch, as some competing devices

do.

And once you've connected your device to a particular online account, you can't change that without completely resetting the watch and erasing all your data. Competing devices from Garmin and Timex let you change accounts. You might need to, for instance, if you loan your watch to a friend or family member with a separate account and want details of those runs placed there instead.

The watch also goes into power-save mode too quickly. If I don't start my run soon after the device finds the signals, it turns off and has to search for signals again. I can see the reasoning behind this, but it would be nice to be able to change how much time you have or to temporarily turn that off.

An upcoming software update will offer some improvements. Nike says you'll be able to set the time and date directly from the watch, without needing a computer. There's also promise of a stopwatch feature, so you can use the device when you have no GPS signal or foot sensor around. Those are two features that should have been there from the start.

This device is designed more for form than function. It's not for hard-core runners used to lots of customization and data. It's simplified for beginners and others content with just the basics. That mentality is underscored with inspirational messages such as "Way to go" and "Job well done" after each run - a bit insulting to hard-core runners after finishing a particularly bad run.

Perhaps one day, I'll get a device that has the full functionality of a Garmin or Timex [watch](#) but works as well as the Nike SportWatch in big cities. It doesn't matter which one does it first. I'm just glad there's healthy competition to get there.

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