

## Review: Under Armour's fitness gadgets need to shape up

January 19 2016, by Anick Jesdanun

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In this Jan. 4, 2016, file photo, the Under Armour HealthBox is displayed in New York. Developed by Under Armour and HTC, the \$400 kit includes a scale, a chest strap to monitor heart rate, and a fitness band to track steps and sleep. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File)

You may know Under Armour mostly for its heavily marketed line of athletic sportswear. But the company has bigger ambitions: It's jumping into the crowded market for wearable gadgets that aim to help both

athletes and couch potatoes track their fitness.

Its \$400 package, called the UA HealthBox, comes out this Friday. Made in partnership with gadget maker HTC, the HealthBox has a wrist tracker, a heart-rate chest strap and a wireless bathroom scale. Other components—including shoes embedded with tracking sensors—are on the way.

That's a lot of goodies, even for an avid runner like me, who's accustomed to wearing multiple watches to track workouts. But does it make sense to get all these gadgets from one company? Under Armour isn't first with any of these, and rival products do many things as well or better.

To find out, I tested Under Armour's products and apps over more than 300 miles of running, including seven races over the past two weeks at Florida's Disney World and California's Disneyland.

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## FOR EXERCISE

On its face, the UA Band is just another wristworn fitness tracker for measuring steps, sleep and heart rate. And there's an asterisk, too: The device disables heart-rate tracking during runs and spin class. Under Armour wants you to use its UA Heart Rate chest strap instead, as wrist sensors aren't as reliable.



In this Jan. 4, 2016, file photo, the Under Armour scale is displayed in New York. The Bluetooth and Wi-Fi enabled scale measures weight and body fat percentage. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File)

Although the chest strap is a pain to wear, there's an advantage to having those devices working together. A small light on the Band changes color as your pulse increases with workout intensity.

I aimed for the highest intensity—red—during shorter races, but for full and half marathons, red meant I wasn't conserving enough energy for the final miles. The colored lights help make up for the fact that the Band's display is hard to read during runs.

Although the Band doesn't have GPS, it does an adequate job at measuring distance during workouts. It does borrow your phone's GPS to track route information.



In this Jan. 4, 2016, file photo, an Under Armour chest strap heart rate monitor is displayed in New York. A \$400 package called the UA HealthBox comes out Friday, Jan. 22, just as New Year's resolutions get going. Made in partnership with gadget maker HTC, the HealthBox has a wrist tracker, a heart-rate chest strap and a wireless bathroom scale. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File)

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## FOR SLEEP

The Band's battery lasts a few days under normal use, which is comparable to Fitbits, but longer than smartwatches and Microsoft's

Band 2 fitness tracker. You can recharge halfway in just 15 minutes, which is important if you're wearing the gadget all night.



In this Jan. 4, 2016, file photo, the Under Armour Band is displayed in New York. The wrist band tracks steps, distance, resting heart rate and sleep. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File)

As is typical with fitness trackers, the Band automatically detects how long and how well you sleep. It goes further in singling out your last pulse reading before you wake up. That's your resting heart rate; a high rate could suggest overtraining—or simply that you're out of shape.

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FOR WEIGHT CONTROL



In this Jan. 4, 2016, file photo, a pair of Under Armour SpeedForm Gemini 2 Record Equipped running shoes are displayed in New York. The shoes contain an embedded chip to track exercise. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File)

The UA Scale syncs weight and body-fat percentage with the company's UA Record app, so you can track your weight. Because it's a pain to log every single meal, Record lets you simply rate the day's meals as light, medium or heavy—though it doesn't distinguish between calories from



vegetables or junk food.

Though charts help you monitor trends, there's none that clearly connects calorie intake and exercise to weight. Under Armour says it's working on that, but there's no firm date.

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This file photo provided by Fitbit, Inc., shows the Fitbit Surge, among the few fitness trackers with built-in GPS and heart-rate monitors. Under normal use, the

Surge's battery life lasts up to a week. (Fitbit via AP)

## THE ADD-ONS

The three HealthBox devices are sold separately, but because they are designed to work together, Under Armour is pushing the \$400 package. It's a reasonable price, even though it might present a hurdle to digital-fitness newcomers.

The company has also partnered with audio maker Harman to make \$250 wireless earphones with heart-rate tracking through the ear. It's not coming until this spring, and Under Armour is still testing whether measurements are good enough to offer similar color tracking on the Band. I would prefer that over a chest strap. (For now, Under Armour has earphones without the heart rate for \$70 less.)





In this Jan. 4, 2016, file photo, Under Armour's Headphones Wireless, developed by JBL, are displayed in New York. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File)

Also coming down the pike are shoes with built-in sensors for tracking runs. Ideally, these might let you ditch your phone and other GPS devices—at least so long as you hit a pace of 10 minutes per mile or faster. That's a high threshold for many recreational runners.

As a slowpoke, I got credit for only 14.3 of the 26.2 miles in a marathon. And it broke the marathon into two, possibly because I stopped midway to ride a roller coaster. (Hey, it's Disney!) That's one flaw with automated tracking. Normally, you can just hit pause and resume.

If you have the phone with you, the shoes work with the company's MapMyRun app to give steadier pace readings, as those based on GPS can be erratic. Under Armour is still working to get that data displayed on the Band.



In this Sunday, Jan. 17, 2016, photo, provided by Arin Sang-Urai, Associated Press technology writer Nick Jesdanun poses with his medals, in Anaheim, Calif., following the Star Wars Half Marathon through Disneyland theme parks. The 11 medals were awarded following seven races totaling 71 miles through Disney parks in Florida and California from Jan. 7 to 17. The races were used to test Under Armour's new gadgets and apps aimed at helping athletes and couch potatoes better meet fitness goals. (Arin Sang-Urai/Courtesy of Nick Jesdanun via AP)

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## THE APPS

The dashboard of the UA Record app is divided into four quadrants for sleep, calories, workouts and daily steps. A circle in the middle is for

your weight—normally hidden so you can take screenshots to boast to your friends. While other fitness apps tend to make you fish around for information, the Record's quadrant design gives you a nice summary, and you can tap on any to dig deeper.

Even if you don't own any Under Armour gadgets, the free app will pull in data from Fitbit, Garmin, Jawbone and other accounts. You still need your device's app to sync data, though. And this could lead to double and triple counting your exercise totals.

The app is also supposed to tap IBM's Watson artificial-intelligence system to analyze your wellness patterns and make recommendations. Here, the "insights" I've gotten so far seem more like broad observations applicable to men in my age group than anything personalized. The company says personalization will come later.

For Under Armour to compete with more established gadget companies, including Fitbit, Garmin and Apple, its devices and apps need to do much more together than products that work individually. In my weeks of testing, I see the beginnings of how all this syncing can help. But it's just that for now—a beginning.

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