

Lobster Elite

The Elite is Lobster's top-of-the-line ball machine. Designed for maximum durability, the portable, battery-powered Elite operates even where there is no AC power source. The Elite sells for \$1,049. To contact Lobster, call 800-526-4041, or visit www.lobsterinc.com.

ASSEMBLY

In its shipping carton, the Lobster Elite weighs about 60 pounds, light enough for one person to move without difficulty. Assembling the Lobster Elite requires attaching the handle and removing a piece of tape that secures the power switch. The whole process took us less than 5 minutes. Assembled, the unit weighs about 46 pounds.

The machine was smaller than we expected. This is partly because most of our experience has been with bigger machines, but also because it looks much larger in photos. The compact size, though, allows Lobster to ship the Elite in a manageable box that still has plenty of space inside to protect the machine. We were amazed by how powerful and sturdy the machine is, considering its size.

Lobster ships the Elite with a fully charged battery, so we immediately pressed it into service. The big wheels on back and the tall handle make it easy to navigate the Elite over bumps and even small curbs. The handle is secured by two removable pins that, once removed, leave the body of the machine small enough to fit in the trunk of a convertible. The pads under the machine keep it from sliding around. Molded handholds on the underside of the Elite make it easy to lift during transport.

USE

We filled the Elite to its 150-ball capacity. The bin, which inverts to double as a cover when not in use, has a slot in front to allow monitoring the ball level even from the other side of the court. The Elite offers

a 15-second delay to allow you to get to the other side of the court before it feeds the first ball. It offers controls for ball speed, feed frequency, and top- and underspin, as well as switches for power, elevation, oscillation, and the remote control.

REMOTE CONTROL

Remote control of oscillation and ball feed is optional for this machine, but it certainly is handy. With it, you can trigger the oscillation motor to aim the feed wherever you want, turn off the ball feed to take a break and adjust the settings and then walk (rather than run) to the other side of the court without missing a ball. It's also great when you need to clear stray balls from around your feet.

BATTERY LIFE

We tested the battery life by running the Elite continuously until it would no longer feed a ball, setting it to feed from the baseline to the middle of the back court every four seconds with no oscillation and no spin. In this mode, the battery lasted 4 hours and 15 minutes, shooting more than 3,800 balls. We hit balls back for the first two hours, but ran out of energy long before the battery did. The Elite does have a low-battery indicator, but we disregarded it to see just how long it would go. After three hours we had to bump up the speed a little to get the balls to shoot as deeply as they did at first. When making this adjustment, we figured the battery was about dead, so we were pleasantly surprised when it ran another hour without needing further adjustment. At about four hours we had to increase the speed a little once again. The machine lasted another 15 minutes before it quit completely. The amazing thing is how well it continued to feed balls to the same spot throughout the entire test. After draining the battery completely, recharging took about 25 hours. But, obviously it would recharge more quickly if you don't completely drain the battery like we did.



FEED TRAY/INTERVAL

The rotating feed tray did a great job of stirring the balls and letting only one ball into each hole. In all the hours that we used the machine, we experienced an average of only three misfeeds (when a ball doesn't come out) per hour, and no jams. There were no multiple misfeeds, which under normal operating conditions can lead you to wonder if the machine is empty, although the slot in the front of the ball bin allows you to check the status visually. The ball bin's capacity is 150 balls, but we found that when full, the stirring of the rotating tray would bump a few balls out of the bin. The interval knob on the machine adjusts how fast this tray rotates and therefore, how frequently balls are fed. The longest interval setting allowed 12 seconds between shots, while the shortest interval setting allowed 2.2 seconds. The 2.2 second interval is faster than top players hit a ball from baseline to baseline. But, it's a little slower than the time top players hit from volleyer to baseliner.

SPIN

The spin feature worked very well. We were able to adjust the level from barely noticeable to the kind of spin you get playing with big string breakers. On full topspin, the machine fed a very heavy ball that would jump forward off the bounce, while the full underspin setting would send a ball that literally stopped moving forward and sat straight up after bouncing. This is more

underspin than we've ever seen in live play.

OSCILLATION

The oscillation works very smoothly and feeds balls in random directions, almost like playing a real person. The machine body rotates during oscillation, so you have some idea where the ball will go. Even so, it didn't take long on random oscillation to wear us out.

HEIGHT

True to its name, the Lobster Elite lobs like a champ. We were able to lob any height to any part of the court. And, by adjusting the spin control, we were able to create offensive topspin lobs and defensive underspin lobs.

THE PROS

- ▶ Easy to unpack and assemble.
- ▶ Alignment marker under machine.
- ▶ Arrived with a fully charged battery.
- ▶ Long battery life.
- ▶ Compact and light, making it easy to transport and fit in trunk of a car.
- ▶ Smaller target for hitting it with your



returned shots.

- ▶ Sturdier and more powerful than we expected based on its size.
- ▶ Plastic outer body helps to avoid rusting.
- ▶ Ball bin has a slot in it to let you monitor the number of balls remaining.
- ▶ No ball jams and very few misfeeds.
- ▶ Optional extended warranty.
- ▶ Big wheels in back make it easy to move around.
- ▶ 15 second delay on the feed motor.
- ▶ Adjustable speed, frequency, spin, and elevation of feeds.
- ▶ Full range of topspin and underspin.
- ▶ Feeds lobs better than most teaching pros, with any kind of spin.
- ▶ Random oscillation.
- ▶ The feeds were remarkably consistent.
- ▶ Quiet, no complaints from neighboring courts.
- ▶ Optional remote is very handy.

THE CONS

- ▶ No assembly instructions.
- ▶ Can't charge the battery while using the machine.
- ▶ It took a long time to recharge battery after it was fully drained—more than 24 hours.
- ▶ It would be nice if the battery would just stop charging on its own when it is fully charged.
- ▶ The 15-second delay on the feed motor wasn't much help if you needed to make any adjustments to the settings before use.
- ▶ When the ball bin is completely full of balls, a few can get pushed over the edge by the stirring of the feed tray.
- ▶ Does not offer programmable oscillation.
- ▶ No indicator of the height of the elevation setting.

CONCLUSION

The Lobster Elite is a terrific little machine ideally suited for a tennis-playing family. It's small and easily portable, and it runs on battery power, so you can use it anywhere. It feeds the ball as often as you want to anywhere you want with as much speed and spin as you want. It even offers random oscillation to simulate real play. The optional remote is a good investment and the battery life is long enough to wear out the whole family.

—Dave Bone ▶

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