

#AGINGATHLETE

The Secrets to Lifelong Health and Fitness



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INTRODUCTION

“It is a disgrace to grow old through sheer carelessness before seeing what manner of man you may become by developing your bodily strength and beauty to their highest limit.” – Socrates

Do people stop exercising because they get old? Or do they get old because they stop exercising?

Until recently doctors advised forty-year-olds to take it easy. They feared their supposedly ancient bodies wouldn't be able to handle the strain.

Compare that to more recent times when doctors advise everyone to take better care of themselves as we've now recognized the long-term benefits that come with better diet and exercise.

But how come people stop exercising? Why is that something we all know is so good for us is quickly left behind?

As a lifelong personal trainer, I've heard just about everything. I'm not talking about the small excuses people make in the short term. I'm talking about what happens past the age of forty.

The bills mount up. There's real job stress as you achieve higher positions with far more responsibility. You've got kids' activities on your mind and you want to be the best parent you can be.

Next thing you know it's ten years down the track and you're overweight, unhappy, stressed out, and don't even know where to start. You're in a rut.

My client Cory was in the same boat.

He was a busy dad with two kids and running his family's business. Over time his weight kept creeping up and up and his happiness went down and down. It's not like he wasn't training – he was a regular at his local CrossFit gym, loved being out on his mountain bike, and was pretty active.

But he'd been focused on the wrong things.

I started Cory on a two-month period of training that was right for his age and circumstances. Over those two months, he dropped from 18% body fat to 12%, dropping fifteen pounds of fat along the way. Six months later he was down to 10% body fat and in the best shape of his life.

We accomplished that with relatively little training – no more than six hours per week. That's less than he had been doing before, but the results were better. And the work Cory was doing wasn't all high-intensity workouts that left his forty-year-old body so beaten up and sore he couldn't play with his kids or get through a day of work. No, we finished each workout with the goal of feeling better than we did beforehand.

Cory's results were no accident. They were the result of using all the lessons I've learned over the last thirty years as one of the most in-demand trainers in my city. As I've gotten older, I've become more and more outspoken about how misguided the fitness industry is. In particular, I've spoken out about how many problems you'll have if you're a forty-plus-year-old and you follow the typical advice.

The problems with the fitness industry, from a forty-year-old's perspective, could be summed up as follows:

1. There's no real advice from seasoned professionals as to how forty-somethings should be training.

You get either advice from a twenty-year-old who has limited experience and no idea what it feels like to be forty or you get advice from a millionaire ex-pro-athlete who has no idea what it's like to be a normal human or how to balance the demands of workouts with the rest of your life.

And neither of them places your health first.

2. Despite meaning well everyone wants to smash you.

The fitness industry has made a killing off selling the idea of short intense workouts as the be-all and end-all to every question. The problem is that while we can still train hard and stay incredibly fit once we're past our mid-thirties, we do need to pay more attention to recovery.

When Cory came to me, he was a victim of both these problems. He'd been working with a younger coach, who didn't know the differences between a twenty-year-old and a forty-year-old, and he'd been getting regularly smashed with intense workout after intense workout.

It seems counter-intuitive, but I gave Cory permission to ease up on the training while we doubled down on what really mattered.

Like many Cory struggled to accept that most of my advice seemed at odds with what most popular fitness information says. But I have a secret weapon...

My very first client was my mother. At the time not many people were keen to let me play mad scientist on them, but she has happily endured many of my ideas over the years as I smoothed the edges off them.

In her early to mid-seventies, my mother set four world records and won two world titles in the dead-lift. Safe to say that many in the crowd found my tiny 110-pound (50-kilogram) mother quite inspirational. At one world championships, she was named overall best female based on the formulae they use to calculate parity. Literally crowned the strongest woman in the world that day.

In 2019 my mother hiked in the Himalayas up to 9,800 feet (3,000 meters) in altitude, covering up to 9 miles (15 kilometers) a day. In 2020 we had planned to return and trek even higher – up to 16,400 feet (5,000 meters) – but our plans were thwarted by COVID-19. She would have been the oldest person to make that trek.

That's what a powerful system can do for you. It works for all ages, either gender, and regardless of your current situation. When we get right what really matters, we end up with lifelong health and fitness that can lead to extraordinary feats – including being able to set world records or climb mountains even at nearly eighty years old.

Over the last thirty years of working as a trainer, I have tried and rejected nearly everything you see in the popular fitness magazines. The history of fitness is one of lies and half-truths. P.T. Barnum would have been right at home selling snake oil as a health supplement or telling people to buy a Shake Weight.

All that remains in my work now is what I know works – thanks to thousands of hours spent seeing the results happen with clients. No wasted time. No fancy exercises or supplements. Just trusted methods that have worked since before I was even born.

SETTING UP YOUR SYSTEM

“When I got back to the barracks that night, I sat down at a table in the chow hall and wrote down what I believed to be the most important and fundamental principles of combat leadership, what I would eventually call the Laws of Combat. Cover and Move. Simple. Prioritize and Execute. Decentralized Command.” – Jocko Wilinck

I am not going to compare getting healthier to combat. But what I do know from decades of watching people is that the majority of those who try to get healthier fail. Did you know that 80% of those who joined a gym to get fit as part of their new year’s resolution have already quit by May? Eighty percent gone within five months.

What happened to them?

They failed to plan.

It should come as no surprise that anyone who starts an exercise program should have a plan. Looking at injury statistics for running clearly shows how important a good plan is: 80% of first-year runners get hurt. (Incidentally, that’s why I wrote my running book – Run Strong – to stop people from having to go through those injury dramas.) A smarter plan will have people train progressively more and harder, so they remain injury-free, motivated, and improving. A poorly laid out plan results in people being injured and back on the couch feeling like that activity just isn’t for them.

So, if we use Jocko’s Laws of Combat as the structure for our plan, we end up with four separate topics to address, the first of which is Cover and Move.

Cover and Move states that if we’re in combat you don’t move unless I am supporting you and vice versa. When you need to advance, I shoot at the enemy so they keep their heads down. When it’s my turn to move (into a position that allows me to support your further), it is your turn to provide covering fire for me. We ideally continue with Cover and Move until we overwhelm the enemy.

We also need to Cover and Move in fitness. No element of our plan works in isolation from another. If you’ve ever heard the expression “you can’t out-train a poor diet,” that’s this principle in a nutshell.

If you want to get into better shape, there are a number of essential support elements. Looking at it from the perspective of an aging athlete, there are multiple factors we need to consider. A system is only a system if all the parts work together.

Here are the support elements we need to address:

- Mindset
- Lifestyle
- Diet
- Training
- Recovery

Just like an ally in a firefight we need all these elements working together to have an optimal result. I can’t count the number of guys I have spoken with who have been working out for years with zero, or near zero, visible results. I teach them that if they want head-turning results then they need to get all these parts working together.

The second principle in the Laws of Combat is to keep things simple.

There are a lot of complicated workout plans out there. I call them kitchen sink plans. As in, it looks like the creator chucked the entire kitchen sink at the program in the hope that some part of it would work.

Let me tell you a story about my early years of training people and one of my biggest influences. Charles Poliquin will be a name that many will recognize and remember. He's sadly died but his contributions to the training world will long be remembered. In one of his early articles, he talked about how an expert can explain the complicated in a simple way, and that an expert trainer can get amazing results with a seemingly simple program.

That's the strength of the expert – knowing what to add or remove. Thoreau said it best when he said, "Our life is frittered away by detail. Simplify, simplify." (Although, if I'm being honest, the second simplify seems redundant to me if we're truly simplifying.)

A complicated plan has too many places for errors to occur. If you need to eat one specific vegetable at one specific meal each week, what happens if you can't get access to it on that day? If you need a specialized piece of training equipment that most gyms don't have, what happens when you travel for work and have to use a strange gym?

That's why I make training plans simple. Despite my background as one of the best kettlebell trainers in the world I rarely add kettlebells into my plans. Why? Because most hotel gyms won't have them, and many people can't use them well enough to derive their maximum benefit. Said another way: I don't let my biases get in the way of results, and neither should you. The most common and easiest-to-use gym equipment is, and always will be, your own bodyweight, bars, and dumbbells. So, my plans feature a lot of work with those elements. I want to make sure everyone who does my plans has the greatest chance of success, with no possible excuses.

Jocko's next principle is Prioritize and Execute.

It sounds so simple to take the most important thing and do it first. But do you know what the most important thing is when it comes to your health? Is it strength training? How about cardio? What about diet? Where does that fit in? If you have the busiest week of your life, with loads of stress – like people faced during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic – and you want to stay healthy, what would you choose to focus on first?

It often seems counterintuitive but during times of high stress a big training session is the absolute last thing you should be doing. I know it can feel cathartic to get sweaty and have a massive session after a stressful day but adding workout stress at a time of already high stress is a short-lived exercise that usually results in injury or illness.

But do you know what to prioritize during those times? And if you don't have a system that explains what to follow and why, how will you make the right choices when you need to?

This is where having a system to stick to is so important. As mature adults we don't have youth on our side anymore. Recovery is just not what it used to be. We can no longer party all night, sleep four hours, work all day, and still manage to have a good workout. We need to prioritize some things that weren't so important only a few years ago.

Decentralized Command is the final, and perhaps most important of the Laws of Combat. What it means is that everyone on the team has ownership of the plan.

In most workout plans you are given a diet template. It will tell you what to eat for each meal on each day – but it doesn't tell you why. So, after a number of weeks, you finish the training plan and have no idea why you ate three egg whites and one whole egg for breakfast on Wednesday each week.

Without understanding the reasoning behind why you are supposed to do each thing in the plan you have no ownership. Without ownership, you will fail the moment you no longer work with your trainer.

I never tell anyone what to eat. I make recommendations for how many calories they should eat and what percentage of that figure should be made up of protein, fats, and carbohydrates, but I never give clients a meal plan. I only explain what they need to accomplish and leave it to them to figure out what that looks like for them. I force them to take ownership and responsibility for their own fitness. If I gave them a meal plan, then I am certain that when that plan was removed they would fail.

I can offer suggestions by mentioning that some other guys who had similar problems tried X or Y, but I never give a client a specific answer. From the sidelines, it can be tempting to tell people what to do to try to speed up their progress. But that progress would be false. Without understanding the nuts and bolts of a program, people can never be accountable for their own training journey and, therefore, can never be successful long term without a trainer.

Many people come to a coach hoping for the answers to be spoon-fed to them. My experience shows that approach just doesn't work. I am not the one who has to buy and prepare your food, nor can I be there to slap the poor choices out of your hands. I cannot perform any of the heavy lifting for you, both literally and figuratively. I am not a fitness Sherpa. I am the guide. My role is to shine the light on the pathway that can often seem shrouded in uncertainty and doubt. Your job is to walk it, and only by having ownership over your actions is that possible.

MINDSET

“Twenty years from now you’ll be more disappointed by the things you didn’t do than by the things you did do. So sail away from the safe harbor. Explore, dream, discover.” – Mark Twain.

When I turned forty, I still had a burning desire to try new things. When many of my friends seemed to be slowing down out of apathy and fear of the unknown, I embraced challenges head-on. I made a pact with myself to never settle or be scared of anything again.

But let’s be honest, no matter how tough you say you are, there are still gut-check moments.

Like the time I signed up for a 621-mile (1,000-kilometer) charity bike ride.

I was in good shape – for lifting weights in the gym. The trouble with that was that we were scheduled to ride from Canberra to Melbourne, Australia, through the hilliest terrain the organizers could find. We even took a one-day detour just to ride up Mount Buller – a 58-mile (94-kilometer) round trip for us with nearly 3,280 feet (1,000 meters) of climbing. And that was the easiest day of the entire trip.

I had only taken up cycling three months prior. I spent the first two days of the event taking in as much energy and caffeine as I could to keep up. On the second day, I rode myself into the ground and spent the next day so tired I was scared to ride in the group for fear of causing a crash. The finish of day three was a 12.4-mile (20-kilometer) climb. Once the ride went uphill, I got spat out the back of the group and spent the entire climb solo.

I was tired, miserable, and wanted to get off my bicycle. However, I spent the entire ride, every pedal stroke, telling myself not to quit. As the left peddle went go down, I yelled inside my head, “DON’T!” Then I smashed the right pedal down with, “QUIT.” Over and over, thousands of times – “DON’T... QUIT” – stomping myself to the top of the hill and a rest for the evening.

Somehow, I made it to the end of the ride. The rest of the group did an amazing job of keeping me going and looking after me. I made it to the end despite moments of doubt. But I didn’t have a system in place yet to support future successes.

And then I found Ironman.

Like often happens with me, I felt I wanted a new challenge. It took me the better part of a year to develop adequate fitness for Ironman, even with what had become a decent cycling base. To be honest, two years would have been a much better time frame because Ironman is such a crazy challenge that deserves full respect before attempting it.

And I had a lot of problems training for the race. Running is difficult to take up as you get older, and I hadn’t run regularly for about a decade at that point. I had minor injury after minor injury. As frustrating as it was, those lessons formed the basis for my book *Run Strong*, which has now helped thousands of runners all around the world go from zero to running well and pain-free.

My first triathlon in preparation for Ironman was a 70.3, or Half Ironman race. Most people start with something smaller, but I was running short on time thanks to all the training interruptions due to my running injuries. With only a few weeks of uninterrupted run preparation, I entered a race that finished with a half marathon. It’s quite common in these longer races that you do loops of a smaller run course. In this case, it was three laps of a 4.4-mile (7-kilometer) run course. At this point, I hadn’t run

further than 8.7 miles (14 kilometers) in training and I remember feeling like I was rolling the dice when I turned for that final lap.

But everything went well, and I finished in a decent, although not amazing time.

With only one race and three solid months of run training behind me, I fronted the line for Ironman Melbourne. It was a rough day – the ocean was so severe that the lifeguards refused to go out the full distance for the swim. The swim course was halved for safety and we did a loop to make the distance. Even then it was like swimming in a roller coaster with massive waves looming over us and then each of us suddenly being way up and looking down on the rest of the field. The current was so strong it took me about twenty minutes to swim out and only eleven to swim back.

The rest of the day remains a long blur. It's all the same when you ride for six hours and then run and walk for another five. Eventually the day finishes. But the weirdest part of Ironman isn't what happens during the race – it's what happens the night after. Instead of falling asleep exhausted as you'd expect, you lie there wide awake. Your body seemingly stuck with the switch in the on position.

The day of the race itself isn't the problem though. After all the training leading up to it, as long as you're uninjured, the day is a formality. A reward for all the hard work you've done. But I can remember being so fatigued in the months leading up to the race that there were days I didn't want to train at all.

One day in particular stands out. I was supposed to ride for six hours. Again. And on my own because none of my friends had the fitness to ride that long. I remember being so tired and angry about the whole thing that I hoped I'd get hit by a car so I could stop all the training. I didn't want to be seriously hurt but a dislocated shoulder or broken collarbone would have conveniently stopped me from having to race and I could just rest on the couch.

Somehow, I talked myself into doing the ride. The system of keeping my mind strong was starting to work. Like anything that gets stressed, my mindset had responded by getting stronger. Like any muscle, the more you flex and use it, the stronger it becomes.

But I still wasn't done yet.

That's how I came across SEALFIT. SEALFIT is a fitness company based in California run by former Navy SEAL Commander Mark Divine. While they have many products available now, at the time there was really only one – their crucible event, Kokoro.

Kokoro doesn't really have an English translation but in Japanese it comes out to something like Warrior Heart. That grabbed me by the throat and forced me to pay attention immediately.

Kokoro is a 55-plus hour event designed to mimic the duress placed on SEAL candidates during the Navy's notorious Hell Week. Hell Week itself is a five-plus day event done on barely any sleep (participants get a maximum of four hours of sleep carefully meted out over the five days) to determine who has the raw physical and mental strengths needed to succeed as a SEAL.

And here I was, a forty-four-year-old who had done a handful of half Ironman races and a single Ironman wondering if I could take my 12-hour Ironman fitness and somehow make myself adequately tough and durable to withstand 50-plus hours of beatdowns from SEALs.

I transformed my training. I devoured everything I could find on the subject. I read everything from actual accounts of people passing BUD/S (Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training, or the selection process to become a SEAL) to blogs written by people who had previously attempted and passed Kokoro. At the time there was precious little information and I relied more on books written by actual SEALs about their training and selection as there were far more of those.

In October of 2014, I found myself standing on the grinder outside the SEALFIT HQ with about thirty other guys also wanting to find out if they had what it took. Dropouts at Kokoro happen fast – the first one was within the first hour. If you’ve ever seen a movie, like Lone Survivor, depicting the days at BUD/S, it was exactly like that. Lots of yelling. Plenty of water hoses turned on you. And lots of tough-looking frogmen in your face telling you that you don’t have what it takes.

At one point early on we took off running down to the beach. The pace was fast, and it was on sand. We were wearing pants and boots. Within seconds I started to doubt myself. It’s not like I hadn’t trained. It’s not like I wasn’t fit. But the pace was merciless, and it looked like it could go on forever. Luckily, I caught myself having these thoughts and took a few seconds to have a look around. Everyone was suffering, including all the guys half my age. I knew they’d have to back off the pace sooner or later and I would be able to hang in there.

That’s an important skill – being able to step back and notice what is happening around you so you can effectively make decisions. Most people are too immersed in their own little pity party to take much notice of what is happening around them.

After that, we rounded a corner on the massive beach at Encinitas and the class came to a halt. There we endured hours of PT and surf torture. For anyone who thinks swimming at the beach is fun, the SEALs have a way of stopping that enjoyment. Basically, they find the coldest bit of ocean they can and march you into it, arms linked with the guys beside you, and force you to sit or lie in the water so the waves break over you. They’ll keep you there until you think your teeth are chattering so much they might shatter. Then get you out and they make you run. They run you until you get warm and then they dunk you again. Over and over until you lose count of how long this has been going on or how many times you’ve been in the water. Was this the fifth time or the sixth? How many hours has this been going on?

After a few hours of “warm-up,” they get you back to the grinder where you perform the PST – Physical Standards Test. The SEALFIT standards are tough but I was capable of doing them. They allow you to have two misses out of seven tests.

The tests are:

- 50 push-ups
- 50 sit-ups
- 50 squats
- 10 pull-ups
- 1-mile run in boots in under 9 minutes 30 seconds

All tests are done with a time cap of 2 minutes to perform as many non-stop reps as you can. You get a 2-minute rest between them. In addition, you must also pass Murph, a famous workout within the CrossFit community.

Murph consists of:

- 1-mile run
- 100 pull-ups
- 200 push-ups
- 300 squats
- 1-mile run

This must all be completed in boots and pants while wearing a 10kg pack. There is a time cap of 75 minutes.

I smoked the early part of the PST. But when it came time to run, I clearly hadn't unpacked my running legs on that trip. I had nothing left and crossed the line in 9 minutes and 37 seconds – seven seconds too slow. That meant if I failed Murph I would be sent home.

At this point, it was maybe midday and we'd been going non-stop for hours. We'd already lost half a dozen trainees and the PST had weeded out a few more. Once the weak were culled, we went on to even more hours of PT and surf torture. The culmination was what I estimate to be a two-hour run on soft sand arriving back at the SEALFIT HQ around midnight.

It was at that point that we started Murph. Rep by rep I worked my way through it. The final run was torture. I ran maybe the hardest I have ever run in my entire life only to fall short by two minutes. And that was the end of SEALFIT.

It's one thing to fail for most people. But as when I did Ironman, there was a fair amount of writing on and sharing of my training process and many people watching me. This was a very big and very public failure for me. The Internet trolls had a field day. It would have been easy to doubt myself after that.

Instead, I spent a couple of months recovering. Despite not completing Kokoro, I had still done more than 12 hours non-stop, after months of hard work in the build-up, and just like Ironman I needed recovery afterward. That long term, big picture view of where things fit in – even our failures – is another important mental skill. Many know how to work hard, but few know when to back off and rest and those people end up hurt or sick.

In Australia we have massive sales the day after Christmas. To us, it is the same as the USA's Black Friday. And so it was I found myself home alone the day after Christmas while my partner went shopping. Proving you should never leave an idiot unattended and bored with a credit card I signed up for Kokoro again.

But what would I do differently this time to ensure a successful outcome?

If I wanted a different result I had to learn to behave differently. The man who had gone to SEALFIT the first time needed to be upgraded both physically and mentally. The first thing I had to do was figure out my weaknesses and my strengths.

For instance, I am a pretty good swimmer. I always have been. Not elite, but not far behind. In an Ironman I am capable of swimming in the top 5-10% of the field. Even at nearly fifty, I can pass the BUD/S entry swim test with zero training. So how much time did I really need to spend on swimming? I could not swim at all and likely still swim fast enough to escape punishment and not finish any swimming evolution exhausted. So, I cut down my swim training to one session per week and used it as valuable recovery for my legs from the harder training days I had planned.

While I am a decent runner, it is far from my best event. One of my major downfalls at Kokoro V.1 was that my legs had been so fatigued from the long sand run that I was already exhausted before we began Murph. Therefore, I added a long sand run to my weekend training that I would do after a two-hour workout to simulate running on tired legs.

And to prepare for Murph? Where once this workout had been a difficult obstacle to pass, I decided I would be bulletproof when Murph came along again. I did Murph three days a week. Never fully completing it, but always doing half to three quarters each time. Before I left for SEALFIT, I even did Murph twice in one day in under an hour each time – leaving me a full 15 minutes spare to beat the cut off time.

While spending time on my weaknesses was smart, it wasn't all I did. Inside each of us are these horrible little voices. These voices represent every asshole in our life who ever bullied or scared us. When times get tough, they pipe up and tell us over and over again that we can't do this. That we're not worthy. In a lot of cases, they ruin people's lives and prevent them from becoming who they want to be. But these voices are their own – they're not us.

I wrote down a list of things that trigger me to feel fear. Remember my goal was to never be scared of anything again? Well, when you write your fears down, they look a lot less scary. And what I found was that once I treated my fears the same way I treated my physical weaknesses – by identifying them – I could make a plan to get around them.

For example, SEALFIT has an evolution called Log PT. It's exactly what it sounds like. You and three or four other guys get to heave a telephone pole around until your body is screaming at you to quit. As one of the taller guys, I am always at the end, meaning I often have more weight to carry than the guy in front of me. In fact, one time in between alternately wishing I would die or that the instructors would die, I noticed the guy in front of me didn't even have his hands on the log! We were holding it overhead and this guy's hands were an inch from touching. Instead of carrying a quarter of the load, each of us was now doing a third of the work – a difference of maybe 50 pounds of extra weight per man.

It's easy to get pulled out of a winner's mindset at times like that. You start to blame your problems on someone else. Knowing I tend to quickly anger at times like that, I wrote this to myself: "At times, everyone will suffer. Maybe it's your turn now or maybe it's someone else's. But you can't finish this solo. Let your crewmate catch a breath because in five minutes' time he'll be carrying your load."

Turns out I was correct. The next evolution was a long run and that guy in front of me basically pulled me through the entire thing. The guy could run like an antelope. It's a good thing I hadn't alienated him – or worse, gotten him kicked out for not performing – because it turned out I needed him.

It's easy when times are tough to only look at the negative. When you're trying to get in shape it's all hard at the start. There are a lot of new skills to learn – maybe even cooking for yourself for the first time instead of ordering restaurant food. Maybe it's learning to turn the TV off and go to bed earlier?

At Kokoro I was suffering, but surrounded by guys who, like me, only wanted to succeed. In their own way, they were all busting a gut and putting out just as hard as they could so we could all be successful.

The big difference between what most people are doing and what I teach is that at my gym we build

strategies. Instead of succumbing to that alcohol or those bad food choices, we learn how to identify the wrong behavior. We need to be very careful about labeling food or food choices as good or bad – food has no morality. It doesn't kill people or rob banks. We do, however, make choices that either get us closer to our goals or moves us farther away. For simplicity we label these as good or bad choices.

Over time we expand your list of risks and triggers as more become obvious. We also expand the strategies attached so we have an SOP for each situation. An SOP is a standard operating procedure. An easy way to think of it is that for every possible scenario that can happen, you have a response that is in line with your goals. "If X happens then I do Y."

Eventually you start to use the new strategies habitually and that is where real success comes from. As an example, I can't even remember the last time I had a breakfast that didn't set me up for success first thing in the morning. It's been so long since I have eaten an unhealthy breakfast, I can't remember the last time. Even on holidays I eat the same healthy food because I have figured out what works best for me and how to make that happen regardless of my location.

The same thing happens with the guys I work with. We create a long-term vision of where they want to get to and talk about what actions will help them get there. We don't set a strict rule like, "You must eat two whole eggs, one kiwi fruit, and half a cup of oats for breakfast daily," because that won't work. Instead we look at what their needs for the day are in terms of calories and the breakdown of those calories. We look at whether they train first thing as that dictates carbohydrate intake, as well as what tasks they need to accomplish over the day because different foods affect your brain in different ways. It's important to eat in a way that is both nutritious, as well as helpful in making your mind sharp and quick.

By setting these long-term visions we gradually change behavior until making good choices is easy. If you want to be successful in making healthy choices for the rest of your life, you can't rely on just toughing it out. That may last a month or two, but what then? Usually the harder and longer you have deprived yourself, the worse that crash will be. One day you'll wake up from your sugar rush to find yourself face first in a tub of ice cream wondering where it all went. The only way to beat that is to build good habits.

So how did habit building and strategic planning help me at Kokoro V2?

Not only did I finish the second time, but I was strong enough that I carried someone else's pack as well as my own for a 20-mile hike up and down a mountain. And Murph? I broke my own personal best by a minute despite having been going non-stop for 12 hours at that point. I achieved a 58-minute time – a time that was 19 minutes faster than I'd done less than a year earlier.

That's the power of strategic thinking and learning to pinpoint weaknesses, set targets, and work to overcome them. I finished as one of the oldest finishers they'd had at that point. With the right mindset, you can accomplish just about anything.

DETACH

When you're shooting if you only look through your sights you lose everything else around you. Tunnel vision. It can be easy to miss a crucial detail. Training is no different.

I speak to dozens of guys every week about training and their own progress or lack of it. The problem is always the same – everyone is only focused on the training. That can work well if they've got every-

thing else nailed down, but as you'll see later there are a number of other key areas that need to be in place. If those are all in place, then let's absolutely focus on the training. However, if all you're focused on is the training, and you're only getting five hours of sleep, then I need to get your attention on something more fundamental first.

I see it all the time in the 28 Day Challenge I run. The Challenge is relatively simple and straightforward from the outside. But that's what makes it work so well. It takes away all the noise and confusion people have about their own training. Most people are so massively overwhelmed by all the fitness pros and pages they follow that they have no idea what program to follow or how to piece it together. Instead, they flail about, drowning in a sea of information overload.

In the final week of the Challenge, I always get the same question. Usually I get it multiple times in different forms, but the core question is always the same. It goes along the lines of, "I am going to add [insert crazy garbage workout they were been doing prior to starting the Challenge] when this is all done, how should I do that?" In other words, despite the fact they've been seeing genuine progress for the first time in years, their plan is to go straight back to the thing they'd failed with multiple times previously.

These people have already lost sight of the big picture and gone back to only looking at health and fitness through the small lens of training.

As we get older, we must understand that the only real way to make progress is to view the process in its entirety. The thousand-foot view. You can no longer just focus on how much weight you moved or how far you ran. You also need to make sure you're sleeping enough, your diet is on point, and your training intensity isn't too high too often. All these things play just as big a role in your long-term success as the training plan itself.

One of my clients, Shane, had been really working out hard. He'd dropped loads of weight. And then the weight loss stopped.

So, he doubled down and added in even more training.

When he came to me, he was stumped as to why he had stopped all progress. Once we dug into it, I found out quickly that while, yes, he had been doing well in training the rest of his life was not set up for athletic success. He was sleeping less than six hours a night, eating two to three times what he should have been, and drinking alcohol most nights.

We got to work fixing everything and even dialed back the training, so he had some spare mental energy to use on building new habits in other areas. Within two weeks the weight was coming off again.

Shane had made the mistake of thinking the answer to all his problems could be found in training more. But at the age of 48, those days were done. Once he took a big-picture view of his life and training, he started making progress again.

PRIORITIZE AND EXECUTE

It's easy to become distracted by the sheer volume of information available today.

Where do you start?

The secret is to pick the most important thing and begin there. In the formula I am going to share with you later we set sleep as the biggest initial priority when it comes to being healthy.

My client Andrei was stuck in a rut. His work had him doing all sorts of odd hours. He was single at the time and would wake up at 3:00 AM to take a call from another country, work for a bit, go back to bed, then wake up again at 8:00 AM for the next call. This had been going on for a few years when he came to me.

The normal thing to do, based on popular fitness prescriptions, would have been to immediately start with an intense training program and restrictive diet. That's what people expect from personal trainers, and I know Andrei would have tried his best.

Instead, I focused on helping Andrei get his sleep so his body was rested enough to actually make changes from the training we were doing. We did train during this time and made some small fundamental diet changes, but the first six months was largely focused on just getting sleep better.

From my perspective, the most important thing I can do for someone is make sure they're healthy. That means I help them prevent a heart attack, as that is the number-one killer for men and women over the age of 44. Everything I do is seen through that lens. Yes, we may work eventually on running faster or building some muscle, but it will only be after all the main risk factors for heart attack are taken care of first.

If your training does the opposite – focuses on performance before health, you're not going to last long. You'll be able to get away with it in your thirties, but once you pass into your forties and beyond, you'll find that without health as the first priority you'll just keep having to start over again and again as problems arise.

The second part of the prioritize-and-execute equation is to execute. Many people know what the right things to do are but fail to execute. I know many trainers who fall into this category – they are happy to tell their clients to do one thing, and then they themselves do another, as if what they tell their clients isn't good enough for them. Then next thing you know, they're telling their client all about the new injury they picked up while ignoring common-sense training.

It's only worth knowing what to do if you're actually going to do it. As I was taught by someone much wiser than me, "Plan your work, then work your plan."

IDENTIFY RISKS, OBSTACLES, AND TRIGGERS

When I first met James, he was mostly healthy. I say mostly healthy because he was exercising most days of the week and played volleyball on the weekends. But he drank every night. He thought he deserved it after doing so well during the day.

When it comes to diet most people aren't even aware of all the potential pitfalls they face. They say that you're the sum of the five people you spend the most time with. It's said in relation to how successful you are, but it could as easily apply to diet and body composition. If your social life is filled with events that include overconsumption of food and alcohol, you're eventually going to break your diet and join in – no one can resist forever the lure of their friends trying to get them to drink. Social situations for many are massive triggers that get in the way of us achieving our best.

Now, I'm not suggesting you avoid ever leaving the house again, but if you want to radically change

your health and fitness then you're going to have to leave behind the habits and some of the hobbies that the old you had.

A great example of this is social drinking. You won't notice this until you deliberately stop drinking but people get really weird when you turn down a drink. Aggressive, even. You see, when you make a change, you're holding up a mirror to those around you and some people won't like what they see. They see you taking charge of your life and looking after your health, and they'll realize they're not doing these things. It causes some strange social behavior, and it can even lead to some borderline aggressive situations.

A simple way around this is to volunteer to be the designated driver. Everyone likes having a lift home and knowing that they can trust the driver. I've had many clients use this with great effect during the Christmas period when they're expected to go to multiple client events night after night. Under normal circumstances, people finish the Christmas season heavier than they started it and feeling awful. My clients finish this busy Christmas period using their new strategies in their best shape ever – what a great Christmas present!

We create a long-term vision of where our clients want to get to and talk about what actions will help them get there. And that's what I did with James. We started with a talk about alcohol and how it affects your body's ability to burn fat as fuel. Then we talked about the difference between wants and needs. He wanted a drink at the end of the day, but what he needed to do was nourish his body with exercise and good food. We set up a basic framework so he could have a weekly drink if he chose to, but made sure it stayed in line with his overall goal of being healthier and fitter (remember Prioritize and Execute?).

James worked hard on identifying situations or events that caused him to reach for a cold one when things didn't go his way. Then we set up some habits to replace the alcohol. There were many days where it felt like he'd take a step forward and then a step back. That's what trying to change long-term habits is like. Few people will be able to switch from something they've done for most of their lives to a new healthy habit overnight.

The key to progress is that you always keep your eyes on the prize – a new healthier lifestyle. Everything you do must be viewed as either something that takes you toward your goal or away from it. And, as discussed in the Detach section, as we get older there is no way to be as healthy and fit as possible without addressing all areas of your life.

MEDITATION AND JOURNALING

It can be difficult to make change as an adult. Literally trying to break habits built over decades. While our dietary habits may be obvious, there are many other habits we have that we don't even notice. Many people are plagued by an evil inner monologue. An insidious voice in their ear telling them they aren't good enough and never will be. A voice that opens a doorway to doubting themselves.

Trying to overcome your own psyche is a difficult process. In the 28 Day Challenge, we have a three-step process to begin every single day. That process begins with meditating for a few minutes, reading something positive, writing in a journal about the lessons learned, and then finishing with a powerful I Am statement.

That may all sound a bit touchy-feely so let me break it down for you.

While meditation is one of those things that may seem a little esoteric, it can lead to big results. When it comes to changing habits and behaviors, meditation can help you be successful. It's been shown to decrease stress and improve heart rate variability – a measurement of stress in the body. Those two things alone make it a worthwhile addition to our arsenal of mindset tricks to help us change our lives as Aging Athletes.

Meditation can seem like some kind of mystic practice and many feel lost wondering where to start. Don't worry, technology can help you out. There are many good free meditation apps now available that have guided meditations with an instructor speaking to you and walking you step by step through the process.

I find meditation to be an incredible way to start the day – calming and energizing at the same time. It provides a wonderful clarity to my early morning decision making and starts the day with something nourishing for my mind.

The second step to our process is to read something powerful. This isn't the time to dig out Harry Potter or the latest Tom Clancy. This is a time to read a book on some aspect of personal development. It could be a book on leadership, marketing strategies, or even The Bible. It doesn't matter what you read as long as it makes you think. Even if you only read your book for these ten minutes a day, you'll get through a new book every two to three weeks. Imagine how much more knowledge and wisdom you'll have in a year by having read another twenty books.

The final step is twofold. First, you'll need a paper-and-pen journal and you're going to write a few sentences about what you just read during your ten minutes. Later when you look back at the synopsis of what you've read over the last few months it can contain some powerful comments. And the best part is that instead of these insights coming from someone else and out of a book, they're now coming from you – the successful, ambitious you instead of that little voice inside you. As you repeatedly listen to that new you, you will learn to listen to him more than the other voice.

The second step to help you is to begin making I Am statements. These are simple to do and involve writing three statements about yourself. Those statements could be:

- I Am a thoughtful partner.
- I Am going to perform to my utmost today.
- I Am happy with how fast I ran yesterday.

This entire process – reading, journaling, and making I Am statements – only takes twenty minutes each day to complete. It's an ideal start to the day – nurturing, calming, and empowering.

These simple habits can then be built on to work on visualization for bigger projects that you may have. But without the smaller building blocks in place, it can be easy to stumble when it comes to envisioning your bold future plans. Once you start to trust yourself and have a settled mindset from the very first minutes of the day, you start to realize everything is possible.

My client Andrew was in this position.

He was an American living in Spain at the end of 2019. He returned to New York to tie up some loose ends before moving back overseas to be with his partner in Spain. And then the coronavirus pandemic struck. Suddenly he was stranded in New York, which had been badly hit by the virus. He was without a place to stay because he'd sold his apartment, and he couldn't return overseas because travel was

halted.

To say it was stressful for him would be an understatement. Here he was, a successful photographer, in a solid relationship, trying to move countries, and suddenly he wasn't able to work, he couldn't be with his partner, and no one had any answers for when either might be possible.

So, we focused on calming his mind morning and night. The change was dramatic. He dropped ten pounds in two weeks and was suddenly able to sleep again.

There is a reason meditation has been around for a long time. If you haven't ever spent time alone with your own thoughts, I strongly suggest you try for its physical and mental health benefits.

REFRAMING

During the coronavirus outbreak, I had to spend a great deal of time working with clients on mindset. At one point my client calls consisted solely of motivation and helping people work on reframing their days.

What's reframing?

Reframing is an effort to always find a silver lining in that dark cloud. During a time when a lot of the world was out of work and things seemed bleak, it was hard to find positives every day. I went out of my way to set projects for people to give them something to feel a degree of success.

You're going to hear more about my client Adam shortly, but the story of him applies here too. When he first came to me, he was really out of shape and the idea of having to work hard scared him a bit. I didn't want him to be so sore that he didn't want to come back or push him so hard that he didn't enjoy it. I had to make sure that every time he came to the gym to train, he had a win and went home feeling like he was getting better.

Bit by bit I built up his confidence – never, ever testing him with a single workout. I could have bet my life's savings on his successful completion of every portion of the workouts. Sure, he got sweaty and worked harder than he had been, but he also never left feeling like he'd failed. That was important because in the previous twenty years, he'd felt like a failure physically every single day.

Fast forward to what we were actually training for and he crushed it. He completed the arduous Koko-da Track in 2009, which is regarded as one of the hardest treks in the world. By the time he got to the trek, he'd had so many small wins in his daily life and training that he never felt like he could fail.

And that's what reframing things does.

During the coronavirus lockdown, I worked with clients to find ways to win. We started with the goal to get as lean as possible. Since my clients were missing going out to eat, I turned that into a positive. When you prepare all your own food from home, it's easy to drop body fat. And they all got leaner. In fact, I had more clients get down to their leanest-ever shape than I ever had before because I turned this element into such a big positive for them.

The same clients were missing the gym and rowing machines. So, we made fun bodyweight workouts and had a push-up competition to keep them excited about training with no equipment. And despite

not having access to cardio equipment to train on, we spent months running with the goal of completing a fast mile.

Between a focus on getting as lean as possible, performing a high number of push-ups, and running faster, they all came out of the lockdown in amazing shape. Meanwhile, a lot of others spent that time complaining about the state of affairs and not having a gym, and ultimately gaining weight they then struggled to get rid of.

As the saying goes, “Champions train. Losers complain.” By reframing obstacles, we made very clear choices about which we were going to be and finished a trying period feeling happy and successful.

LIFESTYLE

“To keep the body in good health is a duty, otherwise we shall not be able to keep our minds strong and clear.” – Buddha

When you were younger you could get away with poor habits. Late nights, drinking too much, eating lots of junk food, and generally treating your poor body like a rental car.

The problem is your body isn't a rental car. Just like you end up paying a huge cost to fix a rental if you return it all banged up, the eventual cost to fix a ruined body is going to be high.

When it comes to cars the most common problems come from small physical damage. You're no different. You may wind up in your forties having had knee surgery or a few broken bones, but mostly you'll arrive with your chassis in pretty good shape.

However, just like a car that has been neglected for two decades, what's on the inside may be entirely different. The chassis may look fine at a glance, but the inside of the motor may have turned to sludge. It's not uncommon for guys who look in shape to have horrible blood work and be at risk for all kinds of things, from high blood pressure and cholesterol to diabetes.

I can't count the number of guys I speak with regarding training who are discouraged by how hard they work in the gym but how little change they see from their work. They've been killing it in the gym and pushing themselves harder than ever but with little to show for it. I call it “fit but fat.” These guys all make the same mistake – they tried to out-train their poor lifestyle. You can get away with that when you're younger, but once you pass that magic four-oh, you're going to need a different plan.

The problem with the modern fitness world is that everybody wants to talk training and won't even touch on the things that really matter. That's right – your training plan barely matters at all when it comes to your chances of becoming healthier. The trainers won't tell you that though – they can't. Their job is to sell you training.

As a trainer, I can tell you I am always trying to accomplish the most with the least. I want you to get the best results from the least amount of time investment. Training is not, nor should it be, a competition to see how much you can endure. Training is to get better and make change. Full stop. If I can do that for you in an hour, then I won't make your workout two hours just to test you.

When you look at what is more important – training or lifestyle – it should be obvious, but it isn't. Remember, the fitness industry wants you to buy their workout or their piece of equipment because that's what they're trying to sell you. The reality is that even if you trained an hour a day – about double what most people will ever do – that's only 4% of your week. In contrast, the habits I want to help you cultivate account for at least 45% of every day.

Which do you think has more impact? The 4% the mainstream fitness media try to sell you or the 45% I help you with? The best part about getting the 45% right is that training no longer needs to be something you dread because you're not trying to work ten times too hard to compensate for not handling the 45%.

SLEEP

In the book *Why We Sleep*, Matthew Walker writes:

“Unhealthy sleep, unhealthy heart. Simple and true. Take the results of a 2011 study that tracked more than half a million men and women of varied ages, races, and ethnicities across eight different countries. Progressively shorter sleep was associated with a forty-five percent increased risk of developing and/or dying from coronary heart disease within seven to twenty-five years from the start of the study. A similar relationship was observed in a Japanese study of over four thousand male workers. Over a fourteen-year period, those sleeping six hours or less were four to five times more likely to suffer one or more cardiac arrests than those sleeping more than six hours. I should mention that in many of these studies, the relationship between short sleep and heart failure remains strong even after controlling for other known risk factors, such as smoking, physical activity, and body mass. A lack of sleep more than accomplishes its own, independent attack on the heart.”

I don't know about you, but I am a pretty big fan of not having a heart attack. For a male over the age of forty, coronary heart disease is the number one cause of death. I try to reduce these big risk factors with my clients as much as possible so they have the most successful life they can.

But this is the mistake the fitness industry makes – they want to sell you bigger muscles. No one ever died of small arms or not being able to bench press enough. But many will die from a heart attack. Therefore, the biggest gift I can give any client is helping to reduce that risk for them.

When you look at the different factors that might cause heart attacks, we need to look at what role obesity plays too. Did you know that the less you sleep the more likely you are to increase your chance of gaining weight, being overweight or obese, and developing type 2 diabetes?

The easiest way to see how important sleep is for us is to look at the impact not sleeping enough can have. Here are some problems caused by inadequate sleep:

- Irritability
- Cognitive impairment and memory loss
- Impaired moral judgment
- Hallucinations
- ADHD-like symptoms
- Impaired immune system
- Increased risk of type 2 diabetes
- Increased risk of heart disease
- Decreased heart rate variability
- Decreased reaction time
- Muscle tremors and aches
- Increased risk of obesity
- Growth suppression

Do you recognize any of these in yourself? Have you tried to stick a bandage on that problem by self-medicating with caffeine to make it through the day or with alcohol at the end of the day because you “had a rough day”?

As adults, we need between seven and nine hours of sleep every night. Some people find they are more

toward the seven-hour end of that continuum and others are more toward the nine. However, as with most things, most people will find they are roughly in the middle. For me, I work best with about seven-and-a-half hours of sleep each night, but I make up for it with a thirty- to sixty-minute nap each day. Many of the first responders I work with find they need more like nine to ten hours of sleep each night when possible, with a nap during the day on their days off.

Modern life is super stressful. We are expected to be at everyone's beck and call constantly and instantly. Email, messenger, text messages, voicemail – the number of ways someone can reach out to you now is seemingly endless. And with instant messaging comes the expectation of instant response.

During the coronavirus pandemic, I remember speaking with one of my clients, Jack. Jack is a high-achieving guy. He's an integral cog in programming for one of the biggest name tech companies there is. As luck would have it, he started a new role just as the pandemic was starting. He's now suddenly learning a new position while working from home, helping to home school the kids, and trying to do all of it effectively. What did he do?

He did what most men would do. He tried to tough it out. Within two weeks he was working fifteen-hour days and going to sleep at midnight. Even worse he was still trying to train hard during this crazy time. No surprise that things started to go south pretty quickly. Within a week he had gained weight, the quality of his meals had decreased, and his training had slacked off a bit.

What did I suggest?

Most people would double down on training at a time like that. But that doesn't work. Have you found yourself in this situation – busy at work, busy at home, and still trying to do the right thing but you can't seem to get anywhere? I'm sure you have. It's one of the most common things I hear from the hundreds of guys I talk to every month about their health.

When stress is high you can't add more stress. Jack's car was on fire and he was trying to hose it down with petrol.

This is where most people go wrong. They have a bad day and try to “work it out” in the gym or on the trail. But let's count all the different possible sources of stress in your day:

- Lack of sleep
- Poor diet
- Dehydration
- Alcohol
- Work
- Relationships (with partner, colleagues, or children)
- Training

Most people are already under lack-of-sleep stress. Most people are already under stress from lack of good nutrition and hydration. Most people are under stress from lack of good health and being overweight. Most people are under stress at work.

Does it really seem like the best thing you can do for your body is to add more stress in the form of a self-inflicted butt whooping? Maybe there is a smarter way to go about things?

The purpose of working out is not to get tired. It is to improve. To make change and adapt to your

exercise regimen, the body needs enough energy to do so. If it is depleted from insufficient diet and sleep habits, then adaptation is impossible. Is it starting to make sense why you seem to be working so hard yet are getting nowhere?

And that's where Jack found himself – his body was already stressed from working crazy hours and then he was adding even more stress by working out. It wasn't until I reminded him of the importance of work/life balance and steered him back toward less stressful workouts that he started making progress again. In fact, by taking on this advice Jack lost over twenty pounds in four months and added fitness and strength

Read that last paragraph again. I got him to perform less strenuous workouts and get more sleep to get him to make progress. Everyone thinks it's about "go hard or go home," but the truth is your body can only deal with added stress up to a point, and adding more after that does nothing other than make you even more tired. I gave Jack workouts he could cope with and that would help reduce his overall stress levels. The result was that his weight started coming down again and his overall stress levels became more manageable.

WALKING

Man has spent centuries packaging the world into a neat space with a roof, lights, and climate control. We tell ourselves we are advanced, evolved beings because of this. But we've got it wrong.

The modern fitness world has spent billions of dollars developing machines and advertising them to you in order to keep you fit and healthy. But they've got it wrong, too.

After sleep (which we've already discussed) and food (which is the next chapter), walking is the single most beneficial thing you can do for yourself.

A twelve-year study published in 1998 by Hakim et al. found that men who walked less than a mile per day died at double the rate of those who walked at least two miles per day.

A 2015 study by Zhao et al. found that in men without critical diseases walking over two hours per day was significantly associated with lower all-cause mortality. For men with critical diseases, walking one to two hours per day showed a protective effect on mortality compared with walking less than half an hour each day.

A ten-year study published in 2015 by Dwyer et al. showed that increasing your step count to 10,000-steps per day lowered the risk of death by 46%.

And a nearly ten-year study published in 2013 by Williams and Thompson found some amazing things relating to walking, specifically the fastest pace at which a person was capable of walking:

- Walking slower than 24.19 minutes per mile (equivalent to 400m during a six-minute walk test or 4kmh) showed the highest risk of death from cardiovascular disease, heart failure, and dementia.
- The risk of dementia increases 6.6% with every extra minute per mile. That is to say, the slower you walk, the more likely you are to develop dementia. During their test, researchers found the slowest walkers were nearly three times more likely to develop dementia than the fastest walkers.
- A decrease in minutes-per-mile pace led to a 2.4% greater chance of cardiovascular disease, 2.8% increase in risk for ischemic heart disease, 6.5% greater risk for heart disease, and 6.2% increased risk for hypertensive heart disease.
- If you're not sold on walking yet, there's another factor to consider. Vitamin D is an important hormone in our health. Low levels of vitamin D can lead to:
 - Depression
 - Increased risk of bone fractures and osteoporosis
 - Muscle aches and weakness
 - Periodontitis (bone weakness relating to tooth loss)
 - Birth defects

Vitamin D deficiency has also been found to be highly associated with obesity. That also means this deficiency can be a precursor to diseases that stem from obesity such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease.

Do you know what the number one source of vitamin D is? It's the sun.

This is one of those things where modern gyms have almost gotten things right, but then failed when it counts. They provide a way for you to increase your daily walking by having treadmills available – but those treadmills are inside and under a bunch of fluorescent lights that don't help you get any vitamin D. I understand that sometimes a treadmill is useful. If it's cold, dark, snowing, or possibly unsafe to walk the streets, they can be a great way to add some walking to your day. However, if it's not cold, dark, snowing, or unsafe, then it's probably best to just walk outside so we can maximize the benefits and absorb as much vitamin D as possible.

But the benefits of walking don't stop at vitamin D and mortality rates. On a short-term basis, walking can help to counter regular daily stress. When paired with proper sleep, walking becomes a powerful one-two punch that allows you to turbo-charge your recovery.

How can adding more movement to your day help, you ask? Surely everything has a recovery cost? In most cases that is true. Loaded walking, such as farmer walks or rucking, definitely has a recovery cost. However, unloaded walking has a recovery benefit. This kind of walking is like moving meditation when it comes to lowering stress hormones in the body and gently coaxing us back to a more recovered state.

For instance, a 2007 study by Morita et al. out of Japan found that walking in nature led to a decrease in stress response and emotions. The study measured heart rate variability (HRV), blood pressure, pulse, and cortisol, as well as subjective measurements of comfort, calm, and relaxation. They found a significant shift in HRV toward the relaxing (parasympathetic) side of the nervous system. Said simply: walking calmed the nervous system. In a world filled with stress, instant messaging, and lack of sleep, walking definitively calmed the body.

This was backed up with a 2017 study by Di Blasio et al. that found that post-menopausal women had a significant lowering of cortisol provided they walked daily. Those who walked sporadically did not see any significant reduction.

But we're still not done with walking.

One of the things I always do is benchmark. I make a practice of noticing what the most successful people do and emulate it. When it comes to being lean and muscular, bodybuilders have it right. Forget the excessive drug use and being as big as a house. At its core, bodybuilding is about having a lean and muscular physique – something many people want.

If you ever spend time with a bodybuilder, you will notice one thing when it comes to their cutting phase – there is never any high-intensity interval training (HIIT). None. Zero. Zip. Zilch. Nada. The reason is simple: it is too costly and can result in decreased muscle mass. Bodybuilders have intuitively grasped the elements of recovery necessary for muscle growth. To optimize growth, they spend the rest of their time doing the minimum they can to get the best result. And that result comes from low impact, easy effort cardio.

In other words, they will go for a slow walk.

If you're a 200lb (90kg) male, then you'll burn roughly 400 cal/hour walking. That may not sound like much, and in relation to many other activities like running (~700-1000 cal/hour), it isn't. However, remember that walking lowers stress, allows you to absorb vitamin D, and helps you live longer, so maybe all exercise isn't about the calorie count.

But even with all that taken into consideration, if you walk for an hour a day, you'll burn 2,800 cal/week (400 calories x 7 days). One kilogram of fat has 9,000 calories. That means an hour of walking a day will help shave one kilogram (2.2 pounds) off your waistline over a three-week period. That amounts to 17lb (8kg) over the course of a year— and all with no food restriction to achieve it. Who wouldn't like to lose that much fat over the next twelve months?

Note: a more likely scenario for hard-training individuals is that if you don't have your food nailed down correctly it's likely you're going to slightly over-fuel. Therefore, having the 400-cal/day buffer from walking to take care of any accidental overeating might be extremely useful.

If you haven't figured it out yet I am a huge fan of walking. There are just too many benefits to ignore. But I'm not done yet.

If you look at the training sessions of serious athletes, you see a lot of hard training. Well, that's what it looks like to most. However, when you dig into it, what you actually see is a recurring theme. You see an average intensity of 70% over long periods of time. You see this across the board from endurance activities to strength training.

For example, the Kenyan marathoners spend 85% of their yearly training time on 70% max heart rate 90-minute runs. The other 15% is devoted to track intervals, hills, and racing. But 85% of their year is devoted to work that most would think of as being far too easy to be beneficial.

In strength terms, the average intensity seen in Russian strength research is a yearly average of 72%, plus or minus 2%. That's not for beginner lifters either. That's for Olympic-level weightlifters. So, what gives? How can you train with such low intensity but get such phenomenal results?

The answer is simple – it all comes down to training volume. Elite athletes don't have a job. Their job is to train. And you can't train flat-out every day for multiple sessions a day and expect that you'll even make it to the end of the week. To cope with training so much, athletes have both hard and easy sessions. And when you average all those sessions out, you get to this magic 70% number.

This is where the average fitness enthusiast breaks down. They see the hard sessions of the elites and try to emulate them. But the average fitness enthusiast fails to notice and emulate the easy sessions athletes use to buffer out all the hard ones. In practical terms: if I want to average 70% intensity today and I worked at 90% this morning, then I need a 50% session this afternoon to make up for it.

And this is where walking fits in. It seems counterintuitive that to get more hard training in your week you need more easy sessions – but it's true.

If you want the “secret” to health, fitness, low body fat, and increased work capacity, it all begins with walking every day.

On a personal note, while I am known for running and my book *Run Strong*, there is a definite age limit on running. In fact, running is like the way a bottle of wine ages. There is a period during which you increase in ability, followed by a plateau, and then a gradual decline. If you look at age-group winners for fun runs, what you see is that for a five- to ten-year period the same names are on the podium again and again. Then, suddenly, you no longer see those names and a new set appears for another five to ten years, only to see those replaced again by another set in the next age bracket, and so on.

As I've gotten older, I have definitely seen a decrease in my abilities to deal well with running. This

goes double if I also work to maintain all my other abilities. Running is hands down the most time-efficient and natural way to get fitter, but it comes at a cost. That cost is higher injury risk and muscle stiffness. If you've ever watched a lifelong endurance athlete struggle to bend over and put on his or her shoes or perform a squat well, you understand what I'm talking about. Given that one of the tests for aging is simply being able to get down to and up from the floor without the use of your hands, you should absolutely be worried about how stiff running can make you. But, again, that's where walking comes in.

I have been experimenting for nearly an entire year with a walking base for my fitness training instead of running. On the plus side, I don't get that same muscle stiffness or soreness. And I can get my heart rate to the same zone I can while running by fast walking on an incline. The only negative, for those who are concerned about weight classes for sports like Brazilian jiu jitsu or wrestling, is that walking won't keep your weight down like running will. But given all the other benefits, and that I'm now in my mid-forties, I'm more than prepared to give up that small thing for all the other benefits I get from regular walking versus running.

DIET

“You are what you eat. Don’t be fast, cheap, or fake.” – Source unknown

When I look at people who are in good shape, particularly in the second half of their lives, I see people who pay strict attention to their food intake. One of my first mentors in the fitness world was so strict that he banned certain foods from his house. While this amused some, it got my attention. Because what I saw was a guy in his late forties who looked like he was in amazing shape with a fantastic energy about him. Even now, in his early sixties, he looks amazing – apart from his hair going a bit lighter and some extra wrinkles around his eyes, you can’t even tell the difference.

There are so many fad diets thrown around that it should be no surprise that people don’t know where to start. From the low-fat garbage spawned by a misunderstanding back in the 1960s and ‘70s to Paleo, Atkins, Zone, intermittent fasting, and juice cleanses, there is no shortage of choices for people. The problem with having a lot of choices is that people are often paralyzed by them – they don’t even know where to start. As a result, they skip from one diet plan to another to another before seeing any real results.

So, let me make this simple. When it comes to weight loss, every single diet works on a single principle. That principle is calorie restriction.

When you boil down any diet to its bottom line, there are only three ingredients: protein, carbohydrates, and fat. These are called “macronutrients,” and everything you eat is made up of these three things. Some foods are made up nearly entirely of carbohydrates, like rice, which has only 3% protein and fat. Other foods, like salmon, are made up entirely of protein and fat with zero carbohydrates.

If we are following a low-carb diet, then we remove one of the three possible options for food and we’re clearly missing about a third of what we’d normally eat. In the case of a low-carb diet, you can make up for some of the missing energy intake with extra fat and protein, but most people are still going to struggle to replace all that missing food. Next thing you know, you’ve lost weight – but was it due to the lack of carbohydrates or simply a lower overall energy intake?

Every diet works the same way. Every. Single. One.

One of the more famous supplement-based diets is by a company named Isagenix. They recommend that you replace at least one meal a day with one of their shakes (usually breakfast) and that you fast for an entire 24-hour period once a week. If you normally eat four times a day, that means you’ll lose one-seventh of your weekly food intake just from fasting. Let’s call the shake half a regular meal in terms of your normal breakfast calorie intake, and you can see that suddenly you’re only eating 21 meals per week instead of your normal 28. Is it the magical supplements you’re using or the fact you’re eating 25% less that is responsible for you losing weight?

Losing fat is not a short-term deal. I am always surprised when I see people who have spent years getting gradually more and more out of shape wondering why they can’t see their rippling abs in the first week of a new eating plan. The hard truth is that it’s going to take some time to get back in shape.

Shows like *Biggest Loser* haven’t helped the situation. They depict an unrealistic amount of weight loss compared to what you can conceivably achieve on your own. Their contestants are isolated in a house where they have no access to junk food or even extra food. They don’t have to work or look after their kids. It’s not representative of what any of their (or our) real lives are like. And, no surprise, when they do return to their normal lives, most of them put back on all the weight they lost.

I would much rather teach you how to sustainably eat well. Don't think of what I'm presenting to you about food as a diet. Don't even think of this entire program as being a weight-loss plan. It's not a muscle-gain program, either. It's a right-sizing plan. If you're overweight, you'll lose some weight. If you're underweight and need to add some muscle, it'll do that, too. The key is that you can eat and live this way for the rest of your life.

When most people think of a "diet," they think it sounds a lot like "die" with an extra "t" at the end. (Credit goes to Garfield for the joke.) But that doesn't have to be the case. For starters, we should probably drop the word "diet" and call it an "eating plan." Following a particular eating plan doesn't have to mean you're restricting calories (because a diet doesn't always mean deprivation or restriction).

The second thing to keep in mind is that the most important thing is that a plan is sustainable. We must be able to follow it no matter where we are or what we're doing. It's no good if my eating plan only works when I am isolated at home with no temptations or other people around. It must work if I'm at my kid's birthday party, watching UFC with my friends, on Christmas, or at a work function. The right eating plan will allow you to do all of that without feeling guilty the next day.

Yes, it would be great if we could all just eat whatever we want and not see any adverse effects, but that's not the case. Our desire for this hasn't been helped by bodybuilders celebrating their "cheat days" and that concept filtering into mainstream society. So, let's get one thing straight – good bodybuilders live an incredibly disciplined and monastic lifestyle. While many do have cheat days, they also eat incredibly cleanly the entire rest of the week and there is probably an element of having to maintain their sanity a little bit. How many meals in a row of steamed chicken, brown rice, and broccoli do you think you could eat without going crazy and needing to let off some steam by eating three cheeseburgers with a large serving of fries?

What most people do is nearly the exact opposite, though. They treat themselves for surviving until 3:00 PM. They treat themselves because the boss told them to work harder and they did. They treat themselves because the kids have been a handful all day. And next thing they know, they've had a week's worth of cheat food in one or two days.

Note: this isn't an exaggeration. When I do in-person diet work with people, I typically see two entire weeks' worth of cheat meals in the first two days of week one before they have properly understood the process.

BASIC EATING PLAN RULES

It may seem like there is a lot more information regarding food than in the other sections of this book so far. That's because our diet can be an incredibly complex topic and, as evidenced by obesity statistics, few people understand how to construct a healthy eating plan, and even fewer know how to make that plan sustainable.

The reason many people fail when it comes to a new eating plan is that they set themselves up for an all-or-nothing event. Imagine if we used most people's diet efforts as our strategy in the gym. We'd turn up on day one, after not having seriously trained for years, and grab the biggest thing we could find and lift it the hardest way we could think of. We would leave exhausted with nothing in the tank. Then we would do it again and again and again, day after day, for two weeks. If you were working out at your absolute maximum every single day, how many days could you honestly last?

That's what people do with their diets. They think about the most extreme thing they can cope with for right now and try to make that into a sustainable plan. Hey, just because you can deal with starv-

ing yourself and eating only an apple and a Diet Coke a day for the next three days doesn't mean you're still going to be able to do it in a month or a year (or that you should).

Our eating plan needs to be sustainable. It needs to be something I can do on the busiest and most stressful day of my life the same as I can do it while relaxing at home on the weekend. And that's where everyone else will get it wrong. It's not about the most extreme. It's about who can stick to a sensible plan for a long period of time. I plan on being healthy and fit until I'm eighty. That's another thirty-plus years for me. If I try to starve or severely restrict myself, I won't even make it to next Christmas.

It's like my friend and client Darren said to me at one point during my Personal Best Challenge:

“I've just had a realization. At the end of the Personal Best Challenge when I'm looking the best I have in a while, I'll get my body fat tested again and then pig out to celebrate.

Fuck yeah, because I deserve it.

Shit! I signed up to change. Didn't realize I actually had to change to change.”

So, how do we make our eating plan sustainable?

I like to get clients to eat four good meals per day. A lot of bodybuilding sites will encourage you to eat more often – up to five or six times per day – but these plans are aimed at twenty-year-olds trying to maximize muscle growth. If you're 35-plus you've done all the growing you are going to do. You're certainly not going to grow any taller, and adding muscle mass will be a massive, specialized effort for you. So, you're not going to need to take in as many calories as someone in that twenty-something group. Your metabolism has slowed slightly, and you likely have a more sedentary job.

Part of the problem many people have is a misplaced sense of how much they should be eating. They may have played football or rugby when they were younger and eaten like a horse. Sure, if you're training hard and going through puberty, you're going to be doing a lot of growing and that needs to be fueled. I can remember buying a whole roast chicken and eating the entire thing on my ten-minute walk home from the train station after swim training most days when I was younger. When I was running ten kilometers a day, lifting weights five days per week, and doing Brazilian jiu jitsu three times per week, I would also eat a lot. But I don't train that much anymore – and my diet reflects that. As we get older, we should eat less because we're not burning as much fuel as we once were.

WHAT TO EAT

How do we know what to eat? Here's a list of some protein sources and carbohydrate sources:

PROTEIN

- Chicken
- Turkey
- Steak
- Buffalo
- Pork
- Veal
- Eggs
- Fish of all kinds
- Shellfish of all kinds

- Low-fat cottage cheese

CARBOHYDRATES

- Potatoes
- Sweet potatoes
- Squash
- Pumpkin
- Brown rice
- White rice
- Pasta
- Oatmeal
- Bread

You'll notice I haven't included non-starchy vegetables in any lists (things like beans, greens, and lots more). That's because these sorts of vegetables are fair game in a healthy eating plan – so go nuts! We'll still set up some rules about rough portion sizes in our guidelines, but mostly you can't eat too many vegetables. Fruit is fine, too, but we'll limit it to two pieces of fruit a day. (Don't worry about all the people who will tell you to avoid fruit because of all the sugar – no one ever got fat eating apples.)

So, can we just grab a handful of protein from the list, add some carbs to it, add vegetables, and we're done? Well, yes and no. It's almost that simple, but not quite. We need to set some basic rules.

These are the rules from the 28 Day Challenge. They may seem overwhelming at first but once you start using these rules for four meals a day you will learn pretty quickly. These rules make things very easy once you start to see how simple they are to use.

Let's break these rules down a bit, one by one. That way you can understand the reasons behind each. Because without understanding, there is no ownership. And without ownership, there won't be any long-term sustainability.

1. Eat 4 Good Meals per Day

A high-protein breakfast will start you off great and keep you going until mid-morning. You don't need a big five-course meal. A better way to think of a "meal" is as a fueling opportunity. The goal is not to load up with heaps of fuel at any one time but to put in just enough to get you to the next fuel stop. You'll find that smaller meals won't bog you down like bigger meals do and you'll be much more clear-headed all day.

In contrast, most people feel sluggish first thing in the morning, forego breakfast, double up on coffee to clear their mind, and then fumble through the first few hours before they realize they're starving and grab the first sugary thing they can lay their hands on. That sets up a cycle of non-compliance for the whole day.

Many people tell me at the start of working with me on their weight-loss process that they're not hungry first thing in the day. Trust me, when you do this entire process right – from sleep to portion sizes and then exercise – you will wake up absolutely starving every morning. If you stop overeating late in the day before going to bed, you'll wake up refreshed thanks to a good night's sleep. You'll sleep better because you're not stuffed to the brim. And you'll be starving, so then when you add the high-protein first meal, you'll be raring to go.

You'll end up eating lunch between 1:00-2:00 PM. This should be the biggest meal of the day unless you're training after work. You don't want to go to sleep on a full stomach, so your evening meal should be light.

If you find yourself so hungry that you make poor, irrational choices for dinner, then add a small snack like an apple and a small handful of almonds mid-afternoon. In general, if you arrive at your next meal overly hungry, then you will tend to make impulse decisions rather than good ones that bring you closer to your goal.

The final meal of the day should be finished by about 7:00 PM. Given that you're going to bed between 9:00-10:00 PM, this gives you two full hours of digestion time after dinner.

The people who struggle the most with this rule are those who come from a background of trying intermittent fasting as a diet practice. Fasting can have its place – usually as part of a rapid fat loss strategy – but it isn't practical for the long term and eventually the weight piles back on. Once you've gotten your body used to eating in a small window it's very easy to stack on fat.

Fact: Sumo wrestlers eat following a fasting/limited-eating window strategy. Do you want to look like a sumo? No? Then don't follow their diet habits.

2. Eat Protein with Every Meal

Most people do two things that make them sluggish:

First, they overeat. A lot of the blood in the body gets used up helping to digest our food, which draws it away from the brain and leads to that sluggishness you feel after a big meal.

Second, they eat way too many carbohydrates.

Carbohydrates are a great energy source, but they aren't the only macronutrient. Carbs are actually the things we're going to eat the least of on this plan. When you eat carbohydrates, your body must secrete insulin to shuttle that sugar to muscles, organs, or storage as fat. Carbs also make you sluggish because eating them increases tryptophan in the brain. Tryptophan increases the production of serotonin, which has a calming effect on the nervous system.

A far better strategy is to eat a high-protein breakfast first thing to wake you up and then eat regularly during the day. Protein increases the levels of tyrosine, an amino acid, in your system. That, in turn, creates more norepinephrine and dopamine – two neurotransmitters that boost activity, alertness, and energy. Oh, and did you know that energy drinks like Red Bull have another amino acid in them called taurine? Taurine, when added to caffeine and sugar, gives the same benefits to your system as tyrosine does. But you don't need the extra caffeine and sugar for the tyrosine to have that impact. Instead, just eat that high-protein breakfast first thing and wake up naturally without all the caffeine to kickstart your system.

On top of all that, there is a thing called the thermic effect of food. The thermic effect of food is basically how much energy we burn in the process of digesting that food. Fat and carbohydrates rate about 5-15% of the caloric intake. In other words, if I eat 100 calories of carbohydrates, then I burn 5-15 calories just to digest it. That's a pretty good deal and helps you see how efficient both are as energy sources and why they're so easy to use. Compare that to protein, which rates at 20-35%. It's two to four times harder to digest protein. In other words, you have to work harder to digest protein. Eating more protein increases your metabolism and will allow you to get leaner faster.

Note: a good rough guide is that a serving of protein should be the size and thickness of the palm of your hand. And, in most people's cases, that means they'll need to halve most of their portions.

3. Eat Vegetables and/or Fruit with Every Meal

Does this really have to be explained? Your mother was right, and you should eat more vegetables.

They're chock full of vitamins and minerals and also contain fiber. If you haven't yet gotten to an age where you think having more fiber in your diet is a good thing, just trust me on this, you will soon enough.

I really like the expression, "Eat a rainbow every day." There are hundreds and hundreds of vegetables. You must be able to find a handful of various colors that you don't hate. And if you say you can't eat vegetables because you "don't like them," then grow up. I don't like paying taxes or driving the speed limit, but I do both because adults do the right thing.

Fruit is something we should all eat more of, too. But we do need to be a little careful with it. I typically eat two pieces of fruit per day – one apple and one banana – and feel like this is a good amount. I eat one piece as a snack with some almonds and then another piece after dinner.

Note: a good rough guide is that each serving of vegetables should be about two cups or two fists worth in terms of amount. I equate one piece of fruit as the same as two cups of vegetables.

4. Eat Carbohydrates Only After Training

As discussed briefly in point two, carbohydrates give you a great amount of energy. The missing piece of this, though, is that you aren't always burning carbohydrates. For exercise to burn some of your stored carbohydrates, it needs to be done at a very high intensity. Going for a walk doesn't require carbohydrate refueling. Even a heavy gym session performing a typical strength workout won't necessarily require carbohydrates for fuel.

Our rule of thumb for the aging athlete is that you need to "earn your carbs." To earn them, you need to have done a hard endurance or strength endurance session. Running hard for an hour (a 10-kilometer/6.21-mile time trial) earns you carbs, whereas an easy nasal-breathing run for half that time does not. Doing CrossFit's Murph earns you carbs, whereas a typical strength session with big rests between sets and low reps does not since most of the energy used will come from a different fuel source.

That said, carbs don't make you fat. They only do that if you overeat them and, therefore, store them as fat. The best time to take in carbs is post exercise. The majority of your carbohydrate intake should be done during the few hours straight after exercise. During the rest of the day, you should make up volume in your meals with vegetables.

Don't get me wrong: you can have carbs. You just have to earn them. If you really enjoy pasta or rice dishes, then you better learn to love hard training – because that's the only way you're going to get to eat them regularly and still achieve your body composition goals.

Note: a good rule of thumb for a serving of carbohydrates is that it should be about the size of one fist.

5. Drink Zero-Calorie Beverages

When I'm working with new clients, this is the point where I get the "but water is so boring I need to have some flavor" argument. In that case, I hope you find diabetes or heart attacks interesting because that is the likely outcome of high-calorie drinks.

Water, green tea, black tea, or black coffee are all you should be drinking. I tend to bend the rules here a little and allow people to have a single diet soft drink every few days if they want. But by and large, just get used to drinking more water. Alcohol is not the number-one adult beverage, water is.

As a basic rule of thumb while trying to stay lean, never drink something you could eat. If you want an orange, then eat an orange. Don't drink a glass of orange juice.

I know you're going to ask what the difference is between eating an orange and drinking orange juice, so here it is. A glass of orange juice is made up of a lot of oranges. Maybe five or six of them. When was the last time you ate six oranges in a single sitting? Yet, in juice form, you will swallow all that instantly, with none of the beneficial fiber (and likely a ton of added sugar), and your body will be forced to deal with it all instantly.

Same goes for vegetable juices. Just eat your vegetables. Remember that thermic effect of food thing? It applies to this point, too. Liquids get absorbed straight out of your stomach and require almost zero effort to absorb. The calories are just instantly there in your body. In the case of fruit juice, which is chock full of sugar, that means you quickly absorb a gutful of sugar. Eat the orange instead.

6. Eat Healthy Fats

Forget the "low fat" craze. There's nothing wrong with fat. It's our most abundant energy source and about a third of your daily calorie intake should come from fats. While there are three main types of fats – saturated, monounsaturated, and polyunsaturated – let's not make things more complicated than we need to.

Focus on adding healthy monounsaturated fats to your eating plan. Things like extra virgin olive oil, a small handful of nuts daily, and omega-3 fats from fish oils. If you cook each of your meals with a light spray of olive oil, eat that small serving of nuts, and take some fish oil capsules during the day, you're all set.

7. Eat from a Wide Variety of Sources

One of the biggest complaints I hear with nutrition is people telling me they're bored or that the food is boring. That's on you. Just using fish alone, as a quick example, you could eat bass, bream, flounder, herring, kingfish, mackerel, orange roughy, salmon, sardines, shark (of which there are several types used for food), snapper, swordfish, trout, and tuna. And that's not even counting shellfish like crab, prawns, lobster, mussels, and octopus. If you're bored, you're not trying hard enough.

Your food diary should contain many different foods, not the same seven to ten things over and over again. That said, I tend to eat the same thing for breakfast because I often need to start work early to speak with international clients and I need a quick breakfast that has a ton of protein. My go-to breakfast is diced bacon and eggs with a cupful of spinach, peppers, and mushrooms thrown in, cooked as an omelet. It takes less than five minutes to cook. But the rest of my meals are all different from one day to the next.

Trust me – your body will thank you for this and you'll be far more likely to stick to a sensible eating plan if you eat more than just steamed chicken and broccoli.

8. Eat Whole Foods and Not Supplements

The best way I can describe this is that supplements are meant to be "in addition to" a solid eating plan. They are not "instead of" a regular meal. There are a few reasons for this:

1. Many supplements are liquids or a powder that ends up as a liquid. That gets us back to Rule #5, zero-calorie beverages, and not drinking what you should eat.
2. If they were to make a supplement that was an orange replacement, what do you think it would be made of? It would have sugar, vitamin C, and water. Does that sound the same as actually eating an orange? Supplements take the base ingredients for a food and mash them together, but it's still not the same as the actual food.

3. Most supplements plain don't work. They're usually sold to young gullible men who want to gain muscle, or they are meant to be fat-burning supplements that don't have any active ingredients (because they're all illegal now). Given the lack of intervention in the supplement business, you'd be better off just buying some actual testosterone because at least that would have to pass some lab purity tests.

Save your money on supplements and spend it on better quality, real-food ingredients like grass-fed steak, free-range chicken and eggs, and organic vegetables.

9. Be Prepared

The Boy Scouts have it right. When you're not prepared and don't have good food choices with you at work, you will make a bad decision sooner or later. It is way better to take your food with you than it is to rely on being able to buy something each day that fits your needs. Not only that but bringing your own food will be less expensive.

During the coronavirus pandemic, a number of my clients hit record levels for low body fat – beating how lean they were as stud athletes in their teens and twenties. In fact, I set this as a challenge to them as proof of how powerful preparing and eating solely from home could be. With all the cafes and restaurants closed, they were all shocked at how much easier it was to make good choices and stick to the macronutrient totals we had devised for them.

While the rest of the world panicked and ate junk food, we emerged from lockdown lean, mean, and ready to rumble. There is something powerful in taking control of a situation like that – and truthfully the only thing you can genuinely control in life is how you treat your body and mind. Many of my clients came out of various stages of lockdown and went onto best-ever months in business as they took that same disciplined mindset with them back to work.

10. Break the Rules 10% of the Time

No one needs to be perfect 100% of the time. Many of the leanest people in history have had scheduled cheat days or meals. But let's relabel a "cheat" meal to an "imperfect" one.

An imperfect meal is one that doesn't comply with the other nine eating rules. If you are having toast with your breakfast, but you didn't just train, then that's an imperfect meal. This goes for alcohol and soft drinks, too. If you have a glass of wine with dinner or a soft drink, that's an imperfect meal.

In a given week of eating four good meals per day, you're going to have 28 meals. That means you get five to six imperfect meals every two weeks. Don't celebrate now though, as there are some conditions attached.

No vegetables? That's an imperfect meal.

You deep-fried something? That's an imperfect meal.

Added sugar and/or milk to your coffee? That's an imperfect meal, too.

You can see how I'm not kidding when I say that nearly every person I work with on diet typically uses up two weeks' worth of "cheat" meals within the first two days of tracking food intake.

Most people waste their cheat meals. They survive until 3:00 PM and reward themselves. Well, you can do that if you want, but it means you won't have the opportunity to truly treat yourself on the weekend when you can relax and enjoy it. If you want to enjoy a pasta dish and a glass of wine with dinner on Saturday, then do that. Just eat like an adult with a goal for the rest of the week.

Now that you know how much to eat and how to put it together, it's up to you to make it work. You'll have ups and downs – everyone does. The most important thing is not to mess up on a Wednesday at a work lunch and then blow off the rest of the week's eating plan thinking to yourself that you'll get back on track on Monday. No. Get back on track at the very next meal. Over time, you'll find you slip up less and less as the new practices become habitual and part of your lifestyle.

Remember I spoke about my client Adam earlier? He lost 44lb (20kg) from adding some sleep and walking to his days. Well, the second half of that story is that when we finally did get to looking at his food, because progress had stalled and he was finally ready to admit he needed some help, we found there were some obvious problems there.

Adam worked in a typical sales role. Meet with clients for lunch or dinner. Order big servings and wash it all down with alcohol. In each week he'd have at least five cheat meals just for lunch. On weeks where he scheduled breakfast meetings, he'd have another two or three. For those counting, that means Adam was having more than two weeks' worth of cheats every single week.

Now, I have some further bad news for you. There is no room in your diet for alcohol if you want to be as healthy as possible. Alcohol-related deaths are the third leading preventable cause of death right behind smoking and lack of physical activity.

If that weren't bad enough, I'll give you another reason to ditch the alcohol – it stops you from burning fat for up to three days afterward. That's right. A single drink can stop the mechanism by which you burn fat as fuel for up to three days. So that glass of wine you had with dinner Saturday night means that no matter how well you ate for the three days after you only actually ate well for four days that week. You're not going to get in very good shape when you only follow a fat-burning diet half of the time.

And that's where Adam found himself – eating too much and drinking alcohol far too often. Once he understood what he should be eating and how to construct a meal based on our ten rules, as well as why he needed to ditch the alcohol, the weight fell off him. He lost another 44lb (20kg) over the next couple of months.

By the end of Adam's weight-loss journey, and six months of working with me, he'd lost a third of his body weight and 88lb (40kg) of fat total. Not surprisingly he had more energy and focus for work, and suddenly his doctor wasn't on his back about his weight, blood pressure, or cholesterol. And he confided to me that his wife found him more attractive and that their relationship in the bedroom was better than it had been in years!

TRAINING: CARDIO

WHY CARDIO

“I wake up early in the morning, around four o’clock, and I’ll do my cardio on an empty stomach. Then I stretch, have a big breakfast, and then I’ll go train.” – Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson

Even The Rock knows that out of all the muscles in the body, the most important is the heart. I see plenty of people talking about chest or leg day. I see plenty of concern over how good someone’s deadlift is. Yet no one talks about how healthy someone’s heart is. Given that you can live with weak legs but not with a weak heart, you’d think people would put this in the right order.

The number-one cause of death in the Western World is CHD, or cardiovascular heart disease. That means the most important training I can offer someone has to do with improving the health and ability of their heart. Everything else is a distant second when talking about health and longevity for the aging athlete.

The fitness industry moves in cycles. What was once cool is now derided and much of what we do is a backlash against a previous fad. Back in the seventies, jogging was a huge movement. It spawned the birth of global sportswear giant Nike and helped create the boom of endurance events like marathons, triathlons, ultra-running, and races like Spartan and Tough Mudder.

But right now we’re in an era of people proclaiming that cardiovascular training is worthless. It’s all just an opposing reaction to the jogging craze. The pendulum will swing back sooner or later – and, as with all things, the smartest place to be is somewhere in the middle. Humans like everything to be black or white. But life is more about shades of gray and most of it lies in the middle ground of either extreme.

The term “cardio” generally refers to the heart. While strength training will have a big impact on how you look and how to stay injury-free, it has wrongly taken center stage away from cardiovascular training over the last decade or so. I simply can’t believe the number of people who think it’s better to have good-looking arms than a healthy heart. So, let’s briefly look at cardio training, what it is, and how best to do it.

I see a lot of online programs with various tough-guy inspired themes. These plans promise to turn you into a lion with names like “tactical this” or “operator that.” Let me give you an example of how misguided these plans are. There is a stock test in the Royal Marines of covering thirty miles with a pack, webbing, and rifle (and obviously this is done in boots and pants). This test must be completed in eight hours. If you’re going to be able to go for eight hours, then you need to do some training that goes for about that long and is done with a similar load. And right there is the problem – no one really wants to do the tough work. They will talk about how their workouts are on the same level and then they fluff about with shorter workouts, focusing on HIIT and the anaerobic system. The bottom line is that when it comes to doing legitimate tough-guy stuff, then you’re going to need to go long.

This need isn’t the exclusive domain of the military, either. An MMA fight is typically three to five rounds of five minutes each. While each round only lasts five minutes, the total fight length is fifteen to 25 minutes. If you can’t sustain a high heart rate for at least that long, you won’t last the distance. The same goes for a Brazilian jiu jitsu class. They often last an hour and a half, with a focus on free training in short five-minute rounds with a one-minute rest at the end. If you can’t sustain a high heart rate for an hour plus or recover from a hard roll in one minute, how will you train effectively?

ENERGY SYSTEMS

To understand why some longer training is necessary, you're going to need a quick lesson on energy systems. I like to think of the three ways we create energy like warning lights on the dashboard of your car – green, yellow, and red.

The green, which is as we all know means “go,” is for the aerobic system. The green light is the one you always want on because it powers everything. It represents the bottom layer of how you produce energy and can create large amounts of energy almost indefinitely. It nearly completely powers things that take longer than two minutes. Its drawback is that it can only give you a certain amount of real power. When you want to turn on the afterburners, you need more energy than this system can create.

This is where the anaerobic systems come in. We have two of these – the glycolytic and alactic. These systems are the yellow and red lights, respectively.

The glycolytic system will take you from ten seconds out to about fifty before you simply can't sustain that kind of workload any longer. When we get to this point, alarm bells start to go off. Once you enter the yellow territory, sooner or later you're going to need to slow down.

The alactic system (also called the ATP/CP system) produces enormous amounts of power but only for very short durations. As an example of how little time can be spent in this red zone, think of Usain Bolt, who was perhaps the greatest alactic athlete on the planet. His race lasts only ten seconds and he was already starting to slow down at the seventy-meter mark, after only seven seconds. If the best athlete on the planet can last seven seconds in that red zone, that means the rest of us have only five or six seconds at best.

This is why the length of the activity must be considered when you decide how to structure your training. At fifteen minutes, an MMA match is just as long as a 5,000m race in terms of time at the elite level. It always strikes me as funny that people think of fighters as power athletes and runners as endurance athletes, yet their events take the same length of time. Yes, a fighter needs to work in and out of their yellow and red zones looking for takedowns and throwing punches and kicks, but so does a runner who surges to break the pack and then kicks for home. The differences you see are only of muscular action, not of energy output.

Once you've hit the yellow zone, no matter your sport, it's only a matter of time before you're forced to slow down. Your heart simply can't pump enough blood to the working muscles to sustain that work rate. The solution? You need a bigger, better pump.

MAKE THE AEROBIC SYSTEM A PRIORITY

If you want performance, you need to go back to your green light – you need a strong aerobic system. Here's why:

Your aerobic system allows you to work harder before going into your yellow or red zones. Let's pick some arbitrary numbers to use as an example. If we use Maffetone's heart rate guidelines (see below) to give a rough idea of someone's aerobic ability, we use the calculation of “180 minus your age.” For me, today, that gives me a rough score of 132bpm before I head into my yellow zone and risk burning out – remember I've got at best a few minutes here. If you put the work in here, then over time you will be both able to work harder at even such a low heart rate as well as better deal with higher heart rates before you go into the yellow zone.

But having a more powerful aerobic system isn't just about being able to work harder for longer. It also allows you to recover faster between efforts. The aerobic system is what is responsible for clearing the oxygen debt in the early stages of exercising. Oxygen debt is best thought of as the amount of energy used that couldn't be created by the aerobic system. The more powerful the aerobic system is, the faster it will deal with the debt. In a tournament situation, such as Brazilian jiu jitsu competitions, where you have multiple matches to win to get to the finals, this could be the difference between arriving at the final relatively fresh or well below your best. It's also what allows you to recover between rounds in an MMA fight. Although the rest periods aren't long enough to ever recover fully, a powerful aerobic system will provide you better recovery than a HIIT-trained system.

And if you really want to do some legit tough-guy event, like SEALFIT's Kokoro camp, where you'll be expected to run and run and run some more all while being harassed with literally hundreds of burpees and push-ups, then you're definitely going to need a strong aerobic system. When I did Kokoro in August 2015, on the first night we did "Murph" after about ten hours of constant activity, then ran twenty miles up and down a mountain. Then we did 350 burpees.

Yes, you read all of that correctly.

Then we ran two miles to a pool where we did about an hour and a half of non-stop swimming races. When we got out, we did 450 push-ups, and yes, you read that right, too.

And then we ran back to the camp.

If you don't have a robust aerobic system, capable of delivering energy to you indefinitely, how do you think you'll cope with all that? And it's not even about all the running (although I estimate we ran two marathons in two and a half days). The aerobic system allows you to flush the toxins from hundreds of burpees or push-ups so you can do it all again in a little bit. I watched half our class drop out simply because most of them didn't have a deep enough gas tank to cope.

THE SECRET SAUCE TO AMAZING PERFORMANCE

Now that you understand why the aerobic system is so important for anything that lasts longer than two minutes, you need to know one final trick – you need to schedule ninety-plus-minute sessions. There is a very specific reason for this and it's a cool little thing called AMPK.

AMPK makes you better at using glycogen and fatty acids for fuel. The problem is that this ability is only developed when your glycogen levels are low. Endurance athletes know this as bonking and avoid it in race situations at all costs. However, there is a big benefit to deliberately bonking in training, or at least undergoing longer sessions designed to run your glycogen reserves dry.

How long do your sessions need to be? Well, we store roughly 1,500-1,800 calories of glycogen. At an aerobic heart rate riding a bike, I burn 30 calories per kilometer (0.62 miles). That means I need to ride about 50km before I start even accessing this adaptation, which will take about an hour and a half. But that is just the beginning of the process. To actually develop this, I need to work well into this empty-gas tank scenario, and that is why sessions of two hours or more are extremely useful. The good news is you can start to develop this during any longer session, not just purely aerobic ones. At my gym, we had a standard two-hour Saturday morning session designed for this reason, and those who attended developed some amazing fitness. As in, forty-year-old accountants beating thirty-something-year-old SWAT officers and aspiring special forces soldiers.

When it comes to developing real-world fitness, there's a hierarchy of training. Running, riding, rowing, cross country skiing, and the VersaClimber are all at the top of the list. Everything else is simply

not as effective. If you're like me, although you may love to train, there's no sense using methods that can't develop your fitness as highly. Build your aerobic system up so you're healthy as well as able to perform athletically. Time is valuable and it's best not to waste it on methods that don't produce the best possible results for the time spent.

Obviously, strength training is a good thing and many people need it. Well planned resistance training can help prevent all kinds of things from falls to bone wasting to not looking good in a tight T-shirt (perhaps the worst ailment to suffer from). So, you go to the gym. You get stronger. Your muscles gain size. Then, next thing you know, you are struggling for breath after walking up a flight of stairs. You see, all that muscle you gained is quite costly and needs to be fed with oxygen to keep it going.

At this point, most of the hardcore-lifter types will turn their back on any form of cardio training for fear of losing their hard-won gains or because they recognize they're struggling with their fitness. But no matter how much muscle you have, and no matter how important it is to you to be big and lean, sooner or later you're going to realize you need to look after your heart, too.

Most big guys make the decision to "condition" by using some type of loaded movement such as farmer walks or sled pulls and pushes. Maybe they even fit in a "WOD" or two. But there's a problem with this. Loaded work doesn't get the same heart response as unloaded work. Just like your pecs or biceps, your heart has concentric and eccentric adaptations. Normal cardiovascular exercise, such as running or rowing, stretches the main chamber of the heart eccentrically and allows it to hold more blood. Essentially, it turns your pump into a bigger pump. That's a good thing. On the flip side, the strength-trained heart gains thickness, just like your other muscles. That makes sense, right? Your heart responds to strength training in the same way your other muscles do by becoming thicker and stronger.

While a thicker, stronger heart may sound appealing, this isn't necessarily the case. A thicker heart wall can impact the internal diameter of the heart. That's right – your big thick heart can end up with a smaller internal diameter, meaning it actually holds less blood. That's bad. That means that despite looking like a Mack truck on the outside, you're powered by a Prius engine on the inside.

Because what happens when the heart thickens is that, unlike your other muscles which swell outward, the heart can swell inward, too. And when you end up with that Prius engine, your aerobic system is going to be underpowered. I know what you're about to say: "But, bro, I'm a strength and power athlete. I don't want to be a skinny-armed triathlete." My answer to that is that the aerobic system is the underpinning of all your training, even the strength and power work that is only performed for seconds at a time.

The side effects of being deficient aerobically are as follows:

Fatigue: The most common symptom is the need for sugar to maintain function. Even sitting still. Ever wonder why you feel the need to reach for chocolate mid-afternoon? It's because you've stopped burning fat effectively and need to get into sugar-burning mode since you've spent so much time practicing burning sugar for fuel with all your anaerobic work.

Increased body fat: This is commonly caused by increasing carbohydrates in the diet to cope with all the anaerobic work being done.

Chronic inflammation: This can trigger injuries and ill health.

Physical injuries: The structures that support our movement – the slow-twitch stabilizing muscles, ligaments, and tendons – are all fed by our aerobic system.

Hormonal imbalances: This is most commonly seen as high levels of cortisol and low levels of DHEA. The signals are cravings for sugary foods, insomnia, and high levels of body fat.

Reduced performance: This is seen as fatigue, loss of speed, and general overtraining.

In addition, the lengths many people go to in order to gain weight are likely to place their system under more stress, too. Like it or not, those ideal height and weight charts are based off decades of research into mortality rates and you are not so special that you are likely to fall far from the center of the curve. Even if you're built like Lee Priest in contest shape, I will wager you had to make a choice about your supplementation routine that is unlikely to increase your health. Steroids such as Dianabol and trenbolone have documented negative effects on the heart – and that's before you add a ton of weight and spike your blood pressure.

Cardio, or cardiovascular exercise, comes from the Greek word *kardia*, which means heart. In other words, if we want to best benefit the heart by doing cardio, then we need to use a method that best benefits the heart. But what ends up happening is that people use the word “cardio” when they mean “strength endurance.” Strength endurance is an important part of the overall picture that conditioning represents, but it is driven by two parts: maximal strength and aerobic endurance.

When it comes to adding load to our cardio by working on strength endurance as opposed to aerobic endurance, one very important thing happens that actually prevents us from gaining fitness. When muscles tense up beyond 50% of their capacity, blood flow is restricted. While occlusion training can be beneficial for hypertrophy work, it doesn't do much for your oxygen uptake to the working muscles. Without that oxygen uptake, the heart isn't forced to get larger and pump more of that precious oxygen to the muscles. And this is exactly why, if you want to improve your fitness and gain a healthier heart, the usual big-guy options of the sled, kettlebell swings, and loaded walks are out.

The only activities that allow the muscles to uptake more oxygen are the normal low-load cyclic activities that people have used for gaining fitness for centuries. You know, walking, running, cycling, and rowing.

There are two added benefits to getting fitter. My belief, based on seeing thousands of clients do this, is that endurance training builds toughness and adds to the quality of your life.

If you have the grit to succeed in endurance sports, you will have a mind like a steel trap. I have never seen anyone spend the time to get in shape to race an Ironman who struggles in any other area of their life. It takes extraordinary focus and determination to put in the miles and doing so toughens the mind to an extraordinary degree. I always know that the clients who I see with amazingly precise cardio sessions will be relatively easy to work with. The ones who have a pace that constantly varies or give up before they're done will always struggle in another area.

Many of the best things I have ever done have all had more to do with fitness than strength. Kokoro, Ironman, and even things like dirt bike riding all required more fitness than strength. Trekking in Nepal definitely falls into this category as well. There is a real beauty and a connection that comes with walking through, over, and across a country that can't be found from the seat of a car. Many of my best memories are from sweating my way up a steep climb and getting to see a view that few will see because they're not fit enough to do so. If you want to see the world, get fitter.

The benefits to all this aerobic training will be:

- Better recovery between hard work sets of strength training

- Better recovery between workouts
- Lower blood pressure
- Better body composition
- Increased use of fatty acids as fuel
- Healthier heart

So, now that you've got all the reasons why you need some cardio training, let's talk about how much you need. Of the causes of death in the United States, the leading cause by far is heart disease, accounting for nearly one in four deaths.

The top ten are causes of death in the U.S. are:

1. Heart disease
2. Cancer (malignant neoplasms)
3. Chronic lower respiratory disease
4. Accidents (unintentional injuries)
5. Stroke
6. Alzheimer's disease
7. Diabetes
8. Influenza and pneumonia
9. Kidney disease
10. Suicide

There are three of these that can't be controlled by exercise. Cancer, the flu, and accidents are all largely out of our control. But all the rest, even suicide, can be helped by diet and exercise. And when you look at the number of things listed that are impacted by the heart and lungs — heart disease, respiratory diseases, and stroke — you should start to see how big an impact exercising the heart and lungs can have. And remember the statistic for how walking decreases the risk of dementia from the walking section.

But did you know cardio training can also help mental health issues? Low-level, easy aerobic training — the kind talked about using the “180 minus your age” heart rate guidelines — has a very beneficial effect on the parasympathetic nervous system. It calms you down. The runner's high is not a myth. Your body floods with feel-good hormones and your nervous system relaxes a little. Add in some vitamin D, which is linked to depression when levels are low, and suddenly being outside doing some heavy breathing sounds pretty good.

My belief is that most trainers' ideas of what people should be doing are backward. With slogans like “cardio makes you weak” or “be strong first,” they all want you to believe that cardiovascular training is not important. Of course, they think that — running and walking are free, and if you don't spend your money with these trainers in the gym doing strength work, then they won't be able to pay their bills.

But looking at the list of the top causes of death and seeing how important cardiovascular training and diet control are to minimizing your risk, I believe cardiovascular training is the greatest gift any train-

er can give their clients. If you want to look good in a T-shirt, you need strength training. If you want to be here for a long time, you need cardio.

Now, I'm not saying to ditch the strength training entirely — far from it, in fact. I think resistance training plays an important role in many facets of developing fitness. It just isn't the most important piece like many would have you believe.

General recommendations for cardiovascular development, as explained above, are for three sessions per week. Each session should last between 30 and 90 minutes for good effect. This doesn't mean that if you're pushed for time and can only do 20 minutes that you shouldn't bother. But, for the best results, you do need to keep your heart rate up for an extended period. There is a big jump in aerobic utilization of fatty acids at around the 40-minute mark and again at the 90-minute mark.

I like to have clients do two 30- to 45-minute sessions each week with a longer 90-minute session on the weekend when they have more time. It sounds crazy, but I can always tell within a week or two when someone is or isn't hitting these sessions — the change in their performance is that fast.

THE MAFFETONE FORMULA

A basic formula for aerobic work, devised by the guy who basically invented heart rate training (Maffetone), works like this:

1. Subtract your age from 180.
2. Modify this number by selecting from among the following categories the one that best matches your fitness and health profile:
 - If you have or are recovering from a major illness (heart disease, any operation, or hospital stay, etc.) or are on any regular medication, subtract an additional 10.
 - If you are injured, have regressed in training or competition, get more than two colds or bouts of flu per year, have allergies or asthma, or have been inconsistent or are just getting back into training, subtract an additional 5.
 - If you have been training consistently (at least four times per week) for up to two years without any of the problems just mentioned, keep the number (180 minus your age) the same.
 - If you have been training for more than two years without any of the problems listed above, and have made progress in competition without injury, add 5.

I'm going to add one small adjustment to this formula because it is devised for running: if you use a rower or a bike, subtract another 5 as these activities are non-weight bearing. In fact, trying to ride at MAF to begin with will be almost impossible for many until they develop some specific strength and fitness.

To make this work is simple. You have a Prius engine and it needs to get bored out and turned into a big V8. No more looking like a tank but playing like a Prius. To make that happen, you want the heart to be stressed enough that it is forced to enlarge that main chamber, while not going too high as that will counteract everything we're trying to achieve.

Yeah, you read that right. Cardio, actual benefit-your-heart cardio, isn't all about "go hard or go home." When you go too hard, the blood is ejected from the heart before the main chamber can even completely fill up. If it doesn't fill up it never gets stretched out. That means there is no need for your Prius engine to ever adapt to that stress and you'll still find yourself with an undersized engine a year

down the track despite having hammered yourself into the ground with the world's hardest "cardio" sessions.

Instead of trying to make your heart explode through your chest, we're going to apply that 180-rule to our sessions. Starting out, if you're not used to this type of training, you're going to find that upper threshold quickly.

And now comes the bit people don't like to hear. To encourage that chamber of the heart to expand, you're going to need to get it working for 30-plus minutes. In fact, the general recommendation for this type of work — called cardiac output training — is 30 to 90 minutes at 120-150bpm (which the 180 rule falls well within for most). You do not need to train any harder than that to get this benefit. In fact, as explained above, if you train much harder, you risk never getting the adaptations you need to make your heart a bigger, better pump.

TRAINING: STRENGTH

“No citizen has a right to be an amateur in the matter of physical training...what a disgrace it is for a man to grow old without ever seeing the beauty and strength of which his body is capable.” – Socrates

Normal training programs start here with strength training. However, I’m sure many of you reading this will have had the experience that all the training in the world won’t counteract all the poor lifestyle habits you may have developed over the years. The normal modern lifestyle puts a premium on “busy-ness” and the appearance of hustling and grinding.

The reality is that limiting sleep and relying on poor quality food is a short trip to ill health. Sleep alone is such a powerful tool – both negative and positive – that the CIA was banned from using sleep deprivation as a torture method. What constituted sleep deprivation? Less than four hours of continuous sleep in a 24-hour period. So those of you with young children who often feel at your wits’ end, don’t be so hard on yourself. It’s been determined that your kids are torturing you through sleep deprivation.

When we look at that through the context of exercise it is clear to me that the most beneficial thing I can do for you in these cases is send you off for a nap rather than force you through a hard workout. Trying to work hard at this point is counterproductive. So, we have focused up to this point on getting the foundations right – sleep, lifestyle, and mindset are all more important than any workout program when it comes to your lifelong health.

But at some point, when everything is set up right, we have to train.

Many in the fitness industry over-complicate training for strength. They have to. It’s all they’ve got to sell you, so they make out like it’s rocket science. While the human body is amazingly complex, training it does not need to be. Perhaps if we were chasing Olympic medals it might be different, but the reality is if you’re reading this you’re 40-plus and your best athletic years are now behind you. That means – just like you’ve seen with the rest of this plan so far – that your strength training can be relatively simple.

TYPES OF STRENGTH TRAINING

There are three main types of strength training and we need all of them to varying degrees.

- Training with external loads – like bodybuilding, weightlifting, and powerlifting – teaches you to control another body. For example, wrestlers will train with external loads to better control their opponent.
- If you train primarily with your own body – like with calisthenics, Pilates, or yoga – then you get good at controlling your own body. People who enjoy running or climbing are well served by spending most of their time on this type of training.
- Finally, there are those who train with objects – clubs, maces, and cable exercises. The biggest benefit from this type of training is for people who play a sport where you must manipulate an object, such as in soccer or tennis.

Humans are naturally very tribal and it’s very tempting to start heading down that path of specialization and tribalism. “I’m a powerlifter,” says the guy who has never competed. “I’m a runner,” says the

guy who hasn't entered an event for years. Clearly the reality is that for most of us we need a blend of all three types of training if we wish to stay athletic for as long as possible. The human body is not designed for specialization. As the saying goes, "Specialization is for insects." Humans are designed to be a jack of all trades.

That's the danger of getting older. In your youth, you could put an activity aside for months or even years and go back to it without any real problems. That doesn't happen as you get older. If you stop an activity, then you may never get that ability back. So, our training needs to stay varied, both in the tools we use as well as the planes we move in. If this is all starting to sound complex, then fear not, because I have some great news for you.

BASIC HUMAN MOVEMENTS

There are only nine things the body can do. Like primary colors, everything that is possible for the human body comes from these nine building blocks. You'll see a lot of misguided and inexperienced coaches bastardize this list. They have modified it, removed things, and short-changed their customers. One looks at the limitations of their clients shows it. The test of a good coach is not what they can do or what they look like, but how their clients move and what they look like.

The nine basic movements are:

1. Push (both horizontally and vertically)
2. Pull (both horizontally and vertically)
3. Bilateral quad-dominant movement (squat)
4. Bilateral hip-dominant movement (deadlift)
5. Lunge/split stance (including gait patterns)
6. Single-leg stance
7. Flex/extend the trunk
8. Laterally flex the trunk
9. Rotation

I'm sure you've seen a lot of Men's Health-type programs that include a lot more exercises than that. Unfortunately, you've probably also seen programs that include far, far less. As I said above, those minimalistic programs will eventually have you run into a dead-end, losing a lot of possible movement skills in the process.

Most 40-plus-year-olds don't have the time to spend two hours in the gym every day doing every movement known to man, but they also can't expect to benefit from a 20-minute workout featuring two exercises. They need to get in, make their body strong and resilient, and get to work or home to the kids. And training for strength using all the basic human movements makes far more sense for that.

BASIC PROGRAM DESIGN

A program designed around this could be as simple as dips, pull-ups, squats, single-leg deadlifts, planks, side planks, and then cool down with a light jog and windmill stretches. It doesn't need to be any more complicated than that. You certainly don't need the kitchen sink thrown at your program nor do you need fancy exercises that require a specific piece of equipment.

The next two questions regarding strength plans usually come together. How many sets and reps to do

and how many times per week? The answer is simple. It's called the "3 to 5 plan," and the first time I heard about it was in Pavel Tsatsouline's excellent book *Beyond Bodybuilding*.

This simple format has you perform 3 to 5 exercises for 3 to 5 reps, 3 to 5 times per week.

Three sample workouts could be:

1. Squat, bench press, pull-ups, and planks. All done for 3 sets of 5 reps (using weight for pull-ups if possible), with planks done for 3 sets of 60 seconds.
2. Lunge, single-arm push (like one-arm push-up work), single-arm pull (like dumbbell rows), and side planks. All done for 5 sets of 5 reps, with side planks done for 3 sets of 30 seconds each side.
3. Single-leg deadlift, handstand push-ups (or an easier variation), chin-ups (with weight if possible), and kettlebell windmills. All done for 3 sets of 3 reps.

It's that simple. If you worked hard at that template above, you'd end up in terrific shape when you pair it with the diet, lifestyle, and cardiovascular training suggestions already in this book. This program hits every single movement your body can do, and all the muscles involved in those actions. Even better, it wouldn't wipe you out and leave you sore and exhausted for two days afterward.

And that's the real purpose of an exercise plan. It should leave you feeling better, not wrecked for days. I can't count the number of times I have had a new client tell me about the big workout they'd had that left them with so much muscle soreness they couldn't even play with their kids for days following. To me, that workout made their life worse, not better. The key phrase with workouts is "stimulate, don't annihilate."

TRAINING INTENSITY

The next question is always about how much weight should be used? Just like in the cardio discussion, my recommendation is going to be moderate. I say moderate because that works. A body that is already super stressed out cannot adapt. The best lifters in the world lift at roughly 70% of their maximum year-round. That doesn't mean they don't lift heavy, because they do, but it means they do enough light work to balance out the heavier work needed to gain strength.

It's said that to gain strength you need to be working at 85+% of your best to make progress. To make the math easy, let's call that 90%. If I want to average 70%, but I am going to do 3 sets of 3 at 90%, then I need 3 sets at 50% to balance things out. This is why these programs seem very short, but the reality is that you don't just do 3 sets and move on. You'll have multiple light warm-up sets to balance out all the heavier work. (A set at 70% while warming up obviously negates itself).

REST PERIODS AND TRAINING VOLUME

Do you remember that earlier talk on energy systems? If you remember, we had two short-term systems, and we use one of these primarily when lifting heavy weights for low reps. That system, the ATP-CP system, takes two to three minutes to replenish itself after an intense sub-ten-second burst. I used to joke that in many gyms I seem like the laziest guy there, but I am the one who is still making progress year after year, despite my age because I train like an athlete still and follow these guidelines.

Even with long rests and extra warm-up sets, these workouts will be quick. Twelve work sets will end up being between 24 to 36 minutes of work. Once you add in a warm-up, warm-up sets, and a cool-down, you can be in and out in an hour. From my experience, you will struggle to get more than five exercises plus warm-ups into an hour-long session. For busy guys trying to squeeze in training before work or during their lunch break, this is the maximum amount of time most have up their sleeve. For some of you, it may seem like a lot to be talking now about three hour-long strength sessions per week coupled with three cardio sessions of 30-plus minutes. The reality is that the total time for this will be 4.5 hours, or less than 3% of your week. I don't feel like asking for 3% of your week to keep you healthy and fit forever is a big deal.

I am often told by new clients that they can fit more in. That they're not even tired. Yet when I ask them if they're happy with the results, they always say yes unequivocally. Your role as the trainee isn't to be sore and tired. Your role is to improve. As an older trainee, your focus should be on getting the most you can from the smallest amount of training time. So, if we can accomplish that in three relatively quick workouts each week, why wouldn't we? Anything else is a waste of your precious time.

As we get older one of the biggest things we should be focused on is maintaining athleticism. Said another way: we want to be able to do as many activities as possible. The benefit of this style of training program is that you don't waste time in the gym. You get in, work on strength, and leave. This means you save time to do some actual athletic activities. Standing in the gym isn't athletic. It can, however, be used to support your athletic activities – such as hiking, cycling, or martial arts – so you have more longevity doing the things you love.

MUSCLE GAIN

The formula for muscle gain is quite simple – use a range of 100 to 150 reps per movement pattern each week. For natural trainees over forty that is all that is needed along with a very slight caloric increase. I say slight because the downside of a bulking diet at forty-plus is that you'll quickly see your bloodwork come back worse for cholesterol and blood pressure, and then your doctor will want to put you on medication that you'll struggle to ever get off. Best not to go down that path in the first place.

Keeping with our three workouts from above, see how I've made small changes here to help add muscle?

1. Squat, bench press, and pull-ups. All done for 3 sets of 5 reps (using weight for pull-ups if possible). After performing your main strength work, perform two additional exercises for the pulling muscles for 2 to 4 sets of 8 to 12 reps. Good suggestions would be one-arm dumbbell rows and high-rep chins to failure. Finish with planks as before.
2. Lunge, single-arm push (like one-arm push-up work), and single-arm pull (like dumbbell rows). All done for 5 sets of 5 reps. After performing your main strength work hit two additional leg exercises such as leg press and Romanian deadlifts for three to four sets of eight to twelve reps. Finish with side planks as before.
3. Single-leg deadlift, handstand push-ups (or an easier variation), and chin-ups (with weight if possible). All done for 3 sets of 3 reps. Perform two additional pushing exercises such as weighted dips and incline bench press for 3 to 4 sets of 8 to 12 reps. Finish with kettlebell windmills as before.

WORK CAPACITY

What if you were looking to create some work capacity without risking burnout? Work capacity is made up of three factors – aerobic fitness, anaerobic endurance (or the ability to perform repeated high-intensity activities), and muscular endurance. We're already taking care of the aerobic work via all the cardio we're doing, and once that base has been laid you can get amazing results very easily with a small amount of anaerobic work once per week.

But how do you add muscular endurance?

It's as simple as adding in a short circuit at the end of your strength workout. If you keep that same three-day template we've used so far and add ten to fifteen minutes of circuit training, you'll develop adequate muscular endurance for just about any challenge. You could opt for a selection of bodyweight exercises, like squats, push-ups, and pull-ups, or go for weighted options like kettlebells swings, goblet squats, and jerks. It doesn't need to be complex and it doesn't need to be overthought.

A good way to do this is to look at the movement patterns used in your low-rep strength training and then pick movements that are similar and perform them for higher reps. Then, consider what your needs are based on the type of strength you require. Remember when I spoke of whether you need to primarily control external load or yourself? If you're a runner it makes more sense to pick bodyweight movement, while if you're a martial artist you'd want to choose both bodyweight and externally loaded moves.

Using day one as an example with a main workout of squats, bench press, and pull-ups, a circuit of bodyweight squats, Hindu push-ups, and TRX rows or unweighted pull-ups would suffice. Ten to fifteen minutes of this at a fast pace at the end of your strength session will be more than enough to create change.

This may not seem like a lot of work compared to what some of you may be doing, but I guarantee you'll make progress on this. Most people revert to what they know when it comes to picking what to do for fitness. What I mean by that is they go back to what they did when they were in their best-ever shape. For many people, the last time they felt themselves to be healthy was in high school. But don't you think your body has changed since then, and that we may have learned a thing or two about exercise in the thirty years since?

SUSTAINABILITY AND CONSISTENCY

As we age our recovery ability does drop. It doesn't fall off a cliff like many will have you believe but it definitely decreases. So, what do you think happens when you take your forty-year-old body, that isn't getting enough sleep or eating well enough to support your training, and you try to train like you're eighteen again? You crash and burn.

This is the typical cycle you see in people our age. They start at a million miles an hour, as if you can get in shape overnight after spending twenty years becoming progressively less fit, and then they stop. They stop because they become too sore, too tired, or too injured. Their best efforts still have them stopping within the first four to six weeks in most cases.

That isn't helped by internet fitness companies selling short-term "challenge"-style plans. We've accidentally told you through this method that you can get in shape with a crushing workload in a short time frame.

In coaching, there is a famous anecdote about the length of time it takes. A mother goes to see a coach to speak about her daughter. She asks the coach how long it will take to become world-class? The coach replies that it will take twenty years. The mother says, "But my daughter is different. She will work twice as hard. Never miss a practice. Do everything 100%. How long will it take then?" The coach looks at her, looks at the ground to think, then turns to her and says, "If she does all that. If she trains at 100%. If she never misses a session. Then it'll take her thirty years."

The point is that if we try to rush getting back in shape, we actually make things worse. I'm sure you've all seen or experienced it. Every year when the new year's resolution crowd hits the gym, we see a frenzy of activity. But experienced gym-goers know that we have to put up with the disruption for only a very short time. By February most of these people will be long gone, having burnt themselves out already, and the gym can go back to normal. In Australia, when the coronavirus forced us into lockdown, people were suddenly crazy about running and walking. Not even a month later there were barely any runners outside as they'd all already stopped.

This cycle of start/stop repeats itself many times over in most people's lives. The reason it's so prevalent all comes back to what I spoke of before – they start out too hard, with a program that was not designed for their forty-year-old body. Instead, these sample workouts will have you able to train year-round, without leaving you so sore or burnt out that you have to stop. By keeping to a moderate, average intensity year-round you'll get in all your training sessions.

I always joke with my clients about choosing my zombie apocalypse team. During the coronavirus outbreak, it didn't feel like it was a joke! But I would ask them if they felt it would be better to go at 100% for two or three months before burning out or being hurt or to just train at 70% for the whole year? If we do the math, the 100% guy will hit 36 workouts in a three-month period before stopping for various reasons. My 70% guy will hit 150 workouts for the year (if I give him two weeks off for a holiday). Who would you pick for your zombie team? The guy with 36 workouts under his belt or the guy with 150?

The reality is even more pronounced than this. My 70% guy will also be hitting three moderate cardio sessions a week. He trains at a sustainable intensity so he can train far more frequently than the guy who trains all out and is so sore the next day he can hardly move. My guy will end up with 300 sessions for the year. This is where you start to see the power of training consistency over intensity. In two years, my guy will have completed 600 workouts. It adds up quickly. In a single year of comparative training, even if the one 100% guy manages to train three times a week all year, the moderate training guy will effectively have two years of training to his one, with 300 sessions to 150. Now add up that difference over the next twenty years and figure out who is going to be in better shape.

Do not be fooled by the lure of intensity and short-term training plans. If you want to be as fit as possible no matter your age, then you need to be consistent. Intensity rates a very poor second place to consistency.

TRAINING: FLEXIBILITY AND POWER

“The measure of intelligence is the ability to change.” – Einstein

Einstein may have been talking about the mind, but his quotation is equally applicable to the body. When it comes to a well-functioning body one of the key traits is adaptability. A body that has few options available to it is stiff and unathletic. To maintain athleticism and stave off injuries we need to be both supple and fast – two key components of negating the aging process.

These two are grouped together here because they are often neglected in training plans despite being perhaps two of the three most important physical qualities after cardiovascular fitness. You won't feel how important these are until you're too stiff to get in and out of a car correctly or be able to break into a short run to cross the road and avoid an oncoming car. These two vital characteristics shouldn't be ignored.

As we age there are some negative side effects. If you follow all the advice in this book you can minimize the damage, but there are still some realities to aging.

Most adults know that muscles shrink with age – if you haven't felt that yet, you likely haven't made it past forty. All that extra time spent sitting at work or in the car coupled with all those extra reps over the years can make muscles tight. But we also lose muscle power as we age – that means we lose our ability to make force quickly, like by jumping or sprinting. It can be so bad your body won't let you jump anymore. I can't tell you the number of times I've watched a forty- or fifty-year-old standing glued to the ground trying to convince themselves to jump. It's clear they want to, but the body has said a very firm no. Lack of practice displaying power has left them rooted to the ground.

While power is the ability to generate force quickly it is also the ability to absorb and redirect force quickly. That's why power may be more important than strength when it comes to keeping you out of a nursing home. An eighty-year-old who has a slip might be able to catch themselves before they hit the ground. Or, if they do fall, they take some of the fall with their upper body muscles. An eighty-year-old who cannot absorb or redirect force will hit the floor hard and possibly end up with a broken hip or collarbone.

It's not all doom and gloom though. Power, like other physical traits, will improve if you work on it. The guys who have done the 28 Day Challenge will tell you how the simple jumping exercises it includes have made a huge difference in their lives. For example, my long-term client and friend John.

John is a lifelong surfer and not just a hobbyist. He was good enough to be sponsored when younger. But even in his mid-forties he still wants to rip it and competes at a national level. He realized that along with needing to be fitter to be able to surf longer, he also wanted better pop to get to his feet from his stomach. We implemented some simple power movements from the ground to help, and within a few weeks he felt improvements in both his fitness and how easy it was to jump to his feet time after time.

STRENGTH IS THE BASE

Power training works best in conjunction with regular strength training. You need a solid base to perform any explosive movements off. As the saying goes, you can't fire a cannon out of a canoe. So,

before you start jumping all over the place like Spiderman, make sure you've spent time on squats and deadlifts to build that strength base. Once you've got that solid base, then adding in power training is like adding rocket fuel to how you feel.

Don't make the mistake of going for power first. Strength is the cornerstone of power and you need an ample amount first before worrying about power. As an example, in classic strength texts they advocate that until you have at least a double bodyweight squat or deadlift you don't need to worry about power training. Those numbers are talking about elite performance and don't apply to our needs to maintain power as we age, but they do give an idea of how much effort should go into your strength base.

THE IMPORTANCE OF POWER

Even if you don't want to think that jumping is of benefit to you because you like more sedate activities – like golf – I have news for you. Golf is the perfect power sport. If you think about it, you can't hit a golf ball very far without storing energy in the backswing and then letting it go like a rubber band. You generate torque and power as you go into the backswing by stretching and storing energy in the hips, core, and shoulders. The better you do that, then the more energy will be released to drive the ball down the fairway.

If you watch older golfers, they all complain about losing distance on their drives. This is due to lacking power and range of motion. Not only can't they generate enough power, but they don't give themselves enough range to do it because their muscles have tightened up. It's like trying to drive a car as fast as you can in your living room. There's just not enough room to accelerate.

My mother is a perfect example of this. As a keen lifelong golfer, she can still outdrive many who are thirty years younger than her while she's in her seventies. But then, she has an amazing strength base since she is also a two-time world champion in the deadlift. Adding in a small amount of power and elasticity work has made her perform head and shoulders above all her peers.

You may think you're compensating through your normal gym program for the potential loss of power as you age. But here's the bad news – if you train like most people, you're making this worse. I have to be honest and admit the aerobic work suggested in this book isn't helpful in this regard either, which is why adding power into your training is essential. Otherwise you will get slower as you get fitter.

Most people are likely making this worse in that despite having bigger muscles they won't have spent any time on generating power. In training terms, we say that if you train slow, you'll go slow. If you want to maintain some speed and athleticism, then you need to work on some power. Traditional weight-training techniques emphasize slow, controlled ranges of motion, whereas athletic movement is all about elasticity and the ability to absorb and release energy as efficiently as possible.

HOW TO ADD POWER

Developing power is relatively easy. All it takes is a small amount of time focusing on movements like jumping, skipping, and bounding. We call this type of movement plyometric. This style of training activates your central nervous system (CNS), stimulating the fast-twitch muscle fibers so that force can be generated better.

The exercises you can use can be jumping exercises – everything from up and down, to side to side, as well as twisting back and forth – to short sprints and single-leg hops. At beginner levels, it can be

as simple as skipping rope and focusing on getting the feet off the ground quickly to minimize contact time. This beginner-level work gets the body ready for the harder loads like jumping and bounding. It's important to be careful with old tendons because they take time to acclimate.

These power exercises should always go first in your training session after your warm-up. They require a nervous system that is fresh to maximize the benefit. It's no good doing them when your legs are exhausted from squats. Normally in training we go from highest neural recruitment to least. So, despite the order of segments of this book, you'd begin your training with power before moving to strength. If you are doing any muscle-building or work-capacity training, then that goes at the end as it has the lowest CNS need.

Note: in this book because the daily lifestyle practices are more important to overall health – representing perhaps 70% of the outcome – they are given the priority. Power, on the other hand, may represent a final 5% of your athletic ability.

A good example of this is my client Chris. Chris is a high-achieving kind of guy and has climbed plenty of big mountains as well as ticked off events like ultra-marathons and SEALFIT with me in his corner. Before one ultra he told me he was struggling to get up hills while running. I reminded him of how much better he'd felt running when he did the 28 Day Challenge workouts that include a small amount of jumping. We added in some specific hill bounding within his long runs – and within a few weeks his uphill abilities improved amazingly. He went on to finish that race well ahead of the cut off time thanks to his improved hill-climbing abilities.

FLEXIBILITY

Another part of the aging puzzle that is linked to power output is flexibility. People throw a lot of fancy terms about and like to make fine distinctions between flexibility and mobility. The truth is there are some subtle differences but for our purposes when I speak about flexibility, I am simply referring to your ability to move through a full, pain-free range of motion in all your joints.

Perhaps a better way to think about this is in terms of restoring lost movement. Just like with power we lose some of our movement as we age. More time sitting and more accumulated reps in the gym means tighter muscles. We've also got some hormonal disadvantages that have our muscles become less pliable with age, but that doesn't mean you should accept becoming the Tin Man.

Because most workout plans only focus on the training and not what happens outside of training, they are very short-sighted. When I originally wrote the formula for the 28 Day Challenge, it was 8-7-4-3-2. That stands for sleep 8 hours every night, walk 7 days a week, eat 4 meals a day, do 3 cardiovascular sessions a week, and do 2 times as much restorative work as you trained. That's right, I suggest that for every hour you spend training – whether it be running or lifting weights – you should be doing two hours of recovery work. The only reason it was never included was that there are already so many things to teach people within the 28 Day Challenge that I couldn't reasonably fit anymore in.

But this work is incredibly important.

The problem with the way most gym programs are organized is in the all-or-nothing approach. With the focus solely on the training, they don't take into account the real power behind every transformation – having a healthy lifestyle. That's why I created the 28 Day Challenge in the first place – to teach people what a healthy lifestyle looked like so I could supercharge their results.

CUT THE (S)HIT

The truth is you don't improve while training. Sorry, but that's the reality. If we hooked you up to some computers and took blood work, I could show you that while training you're actually getting worse. It's only when you rest and recover that the improvements come. Recovery is largely based on lifestyle – sleep and food are the two biggest factors – but there are other things we can do to help our recovery, and flexibility work is one of them.

Like with most things, modern fitness has taken a good idea and ruined it. Just like they've tried to sell HIT workouts as being more important than aerobic base training, they've tried to sell dynamic warm-ups and stretching as superior to passive stretching.

However, like HIT, these methods don't provide any lasting change. If we're really trying to make change in the body, we may as well spend the time on something that will actually do it. Dynamic flexibility work is like Chinese food in that you'll be hungry for more again soon because the results, while quick, also disappear just as fast.

When looking for a system that makes lasting change, I always ask the same question: "What do the people who exhibit that quality most do?" If you want to find the most muscular, leanest guys around, you need to look to bodybuilders. If you're looking for mature athletes who have maintained a high level of flexibility, you need look no further than martial artists. Anyone familiar with a high-level martial artist will know how much time they spend on passive flexibility. And having verified that there are millions of guys who have followed this trustworthy method for centuries, we can look at some other benefits and clues.

The biggest problem facing most trainees today isn't whether they're working hard enough. It's not usually motivation. (That may seem odd to hear but when people are turning up to train with me at 6:00 AM, I have to think that motivation isn't their problem despite what they may think.) No, the biggest problem facing the typical older trainee is one thing – stress.

As you've read throughout this book, we face many different types of stress in our normal lives. There's the normal stress we recognize from work, but there are many other kinds too. There's stress from lack of sleep. There's stress on the body from a poor diet or being overweight. There's the stress from our relationships – every time your partner does something that irks you, that's adding stress. And then we try to add training stress and wonder why we're not successful. There's only so much stress you can deal with at any one time.

When I started the 28 Day Challenge, I didn't realize exactly how powerful this stress-reduction idea could be. Sure, I knew people needed to sleep more. And I knew most people could stand to lose a bit of weight. But I had no idea exactly how stressed out most people's bodies were all the time. By simply working to reduce stress throughout the entire plan – even telling people not to train on various days because it would be counterproductive – the results have been amazing.

SALUTE THE SUN

Remember I was saying that we should take cues from athletes like martial artists and dancers regarding flexibility? We should look to the past too. Yoga has been around for 8,000 years and the modern world is starting to realize its benefits. Let's dig into it – because when something has lasted that long, there must be something worthwhile in it.

Did you know that breathing in a specific way can either calm or excite the nervous system? If you focus on deep, rhythmic belly breaths, then you can actually calm the body down. Further, if you breathe a particular way – with what is known as ujjayi breath, or a breath that is both smooth and long – you will engage all the correct breathing muscles.

In modern life we have a tendency, thanks to stress, to breathe through our mouths and only into our upper chests. The body feels stress because of this. It can also lead to neck and shoulder pain because the muscles of the shoulder girdle are being overworked for the purpose of breathing instead of moving the arms. Add in poor posture from sitting for extended periods and it's no wonder our bodies are stressed.

Did you know that holding a mildly stretched position for an extended period also calms the nervous system? That feeling you have of tightness, or lack of flexibility, doesn't actually exist. What you feel as tightness is the body tensing muscles to prevent you from moving into what it perceives as a dangerous position. But it's possible to wait that out. Eventually, when the body no longer perceives a threat, it will relax. And the resulting relaxation is not just localized to those previously tight muscles but extends to the entire body. If we add another element to this, we can amplify the results. If you stretch forward, putting the body into flexion, the calming effect is even greater. This return to the fetal position, or variations of it, is incredibly calming.

It's no wonder people think yoga makes them feel amazing. When they walk in, they're usually tired and stressed. But after an hour of flexion-based, slow stretching with a focus on correct breathing, they've managed to relax their nervous system back to a better baseline. All those downward dogs, forward folds, and child's poses play a tremendous part in relaxing the body – so that more training could be piled on, if you wanted.

If you want to turbocharge the results, then head to Yin yoga where each pose will be held for at least two minutes at a time allowing the nervous system to fully relax in each position. If you happen to do the opposite – a class based on extension work – you will likely find that you feel extremely energized. A class based on camel or wheel pose has been likened to “yogic coffee” such is the power these positions have to energize.

I know for myself that when I started adding in yoga to the rest of the material found within the 28 Day Challenge it made a tremendous difference. I felt calmer but with more energy throughout the entire day. Even being stuck in traffic seemed less of a hassle. It may sound like a marketing line, but I can feel the difference between when I do yoga and when I miss it.

In fact, I noticed it so much I decided to measure it. There is a thing called heart rate variability or HRV. It's essentially a measurement of how balanced your body is between the two sides of the nervous system, often coined as “rest and digest” and “fight or flight.” Well, when I tracked what yoga was doing to my body there was as much as a 10% positive difference between when I did it and when I didn't. I don't know about you, but I really liked the idea of being 10% less stressed on an ongoing basis.

My friend Eli said to me during the coronavirus lockdown:

“I don't think I'd have been able to keep my sanity without yoga. Between having to home school the kids and worrying about income and the mortgage, having something in my life every day that kept me calm was super important. Between that and the 28 Day framework, I came out of the lockdown in the best shape I've been in – mentally and physically – for years.

In addition, keeping my body supple and moving well prevented me from having back pain during a period where I was far less active than normal. I get really stiff if I don't make sure to move every day."

THE TRUTH ABOUT FOAM ROLLING

These days it's not uncommon to see a bunch of people flopping about on the floor of a gym rolling various muscles with a foam roller. In extreme cases, they're using Thera-guns – a tool that is derived from a horse massager.

Despite what some may tell you, if you need to bash yourself like a piece of meat so that your body moves properly, then your training is awful. You should not need to go through a solo re-enactment of *Fifty Shades of Grey* just to be able to squat.

Foam rolling doesn't make you more flexible. As a friend of mine who is an elite gymnastics coach said to me, "No one ever foam rolled their way to the splits."

So how do foam rollers work then?

As I said above, "What you feel as tightness is the body tensing muscles to prevent you from moving into what it perceives as a dangerous position." Your perceived muscle stiffness or lack of flexibility is not from a short muscle. Rather, it is due to your brain preventing you from moving into a position it feels you can't safely get out of. The only thing stopping you from doing the splits is your brain. When we're unconscious, we can all day the splits. For evidence see how loose and limp an unconscious person is.

All a foam roller does is momentarily change the relationship between muscle tone and the brain. While that may allow you to momentarily achieve entry into an unfamiliar range, as anyone who has done it will discover, that ability is short-lived. You won't keep it long term, and you'll find yourself in an endless cycle of having to foam roll to achieve that slight gain over and over.

I'm not detracting from briefly foam rolling before a workout. However, it should take less than five minutes. Anything longer and you probably have a rubber fetish.

MUSCLE TRICKS FOR FLEXIBILITY

We have an inbuilt mechanism that protects us – our reflexes. One of these is called the stretch reflex, and it is what doctors are testing when they hit your knee with that little hammer thing. Like any system, there are some parts that are ranked as a higher priority, and with the right effort you can inhibit the stretch reflex.

Try this: Stand in front of a chair and put one leg onto the chair to stretch your hamstring. Now quickly bend forward to what you feel is your maximum position. This is the typical approach to stretching – and it doesn't work.

Let's try sneaking up on our hamstring instead. This time I want you to ever so slowly lower yourself down toward your outstretched leg. When you start to feel tension, I want you to stop and wait there. Breathe slowly into your belly and avoid tensing any other muscles. You'll feel after a few breaths that the tension disappears – you've fooled the stretch reflex. Continue this process until you legitimately can't go any further. I'll bet it's much deeper than your previous attempt.

You'll find that some stretches work much better for this than others. The hamstring stretch above will work fine, but a standing straddle will not. Why not? The answer is that your body will perceive risk in some stretches and keep those muscles tight to prevent a fall into a dangerous position. A way to get around this is to use props to help you get into the position more safely, like performing a standing straddle but putting your hands on a box for support.

Another reason these props are important is that you may need to spend a fair amount of time in each position for the stretch reflex to die down. Some positions will just elicit a bigger response than others. But if you think back to our illustration of the doctor's hammer against the knee, have you ever seen what happens if the doctor performs that multiple times in short succession?

The answer is that each response from your body becomes less. Just like muscles get tired, so do signals from the brain. If you wait in a position long enough, eventually the body's reflexes will tire, and you'll fall into a new, deeper position.

Like with all the training discussed in this book, your flexibility will progress fastest if you err on the side of caution. Moderate, consistent practice will help you achieve far more flexibility gains than trying to quickly slam yourself into extreme positions ever can.

TO GAIN MORE, FLEX HARDER!

Weirdly, when you get to the point where you can no longer lull the stretch reflex to sleep, you can go further by doing the exact opposite.

If you contract a muscle hard it will inhibit the stretch reflex momentarily afterward. It's almost as if the nervous system tells the body to calm down because it doesn't want to add even more tension to the area. However, this suppression is very short-lived – within five seconds it is back to 70% of its original force. So, you want to contract the muscle, relax, and then move to a new, deeper position immediately. (Although again, never to the point of causing the body to stiffen up and contract extra muscles as to prevent any gain in range of movement.)

Many may be familiar with the PNF methods – proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation – a common method where the body can be quickly tricked into some impressive gains in range. However, like foam rolling, these gains won't stick, and you'll still need to spend ample time in relaxed stretching to convince the body that it owns the new ranges.

The best approach is actually a combination of both of the above stretching methods so that not only will you gain range, but you'll also gain strength in the extended, new range. Adding range is always good but you can't just add range. You need to also develop motor patterns in the new range, and the best way to do that is to make the muscles contract there.

USE YOUR BREATH

To use this method effectively, first inhale maximally. Tighten up the body gradually, especially the muscles being stretched. Remember they are already in a weak position and avoid cranking to maximum tension without this gradual ramp-up.

Make sure to hold your breath and the tension generated for a short while – I like holds of up to ten

seconds. Take the full ten seconds to build to the maximum tension you can generate throughout the entire body. Then suddenly let it go – focus on instantly relaxing every muscle.

Drop into a new lower position. Avoid the temptation to go too far – that will only make the body tense up again. Spend some time in the new position to allow the body to become accustomed to it. You may find that in some cases it may take several minutes to get the body to fully relax into the new pose.

Keep repeating this sequence until you can go no further today. Spend a further few minutes relaxed in the end position.

Don't be surprised if you experience considerable muscle soreness the next day from this extreme stretching method. The good news is that like most of this book, the best results with flexibility come from daily consistent practice, not intense practice. You only need to use this heavy contract-relax method one day per week. Just use relaxed stretching on the other days.

CONCLUSION

There's a tremendous amount of information contained within this book – I've condensed lessons from the last forty years of training myself and others down to the most important lessons. While all of it is important, the elements about lifestyle must be focused on first.

As we age, the ability to out-train our poor food and lifestyle choices disappears. I speak with a huge number of men and women every month who have tried to do what they used to do and can't understand why they're failing. It's because the habits they used to have also included poor lifestyle choices from when they were younger. What you eat absolutely matters more as you get older. The number of hours of sleep you get is far more important.

When people first come to me and I recommend they undergo the 28 Day Challenge to begin with, many think they're far too advanced for that. But considering guys have gotten down to 6% body fat or run 100-mile ultra-marathons by following the advice in the Challenge, I know the strengths of it firsthand. And the strengths of it are that once and for all they see the benefits of how powerful these habits can be when following the system I present during the Challenge.

I knew I was onto a winner when I first had a client trial the format of the Challenge for me. He lost 18 pounds (over 8 kilograms) in a 4-week period. His resting heart rate dropped ten beats a minute, his blood pressure and blood sugar levels lowered, and his fitness skyrocketed. It was eye-opening for me.

These days I have been through the process with hundreds of guys and nothing surprises me about the results they see. From diabetics halving the number of daily insulin injections they need to incredibly low body fat figures to ultra-marathons. The program really is life-changing for people.

There are two things you can do right now that will help you live a longer and healthier life:

1. Start working on fixing any of the holes that are now apparent in your own lifestyle. You have the knowledge now.
2. Join my community on Facebook for Ageing Athletes here - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ageingathlete>

As a final favor to me, I would very much appreciate a review of my book on Amazon.

I wish you all the best with your future training and hope we cross paths one day out on a trail with you in the best shape of your life.