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Men's Health

NFL STRONG

HOW TO TRAIN LIKE

CHRISTIAN McCAFFREY

DK METCALF

JOE BURROW

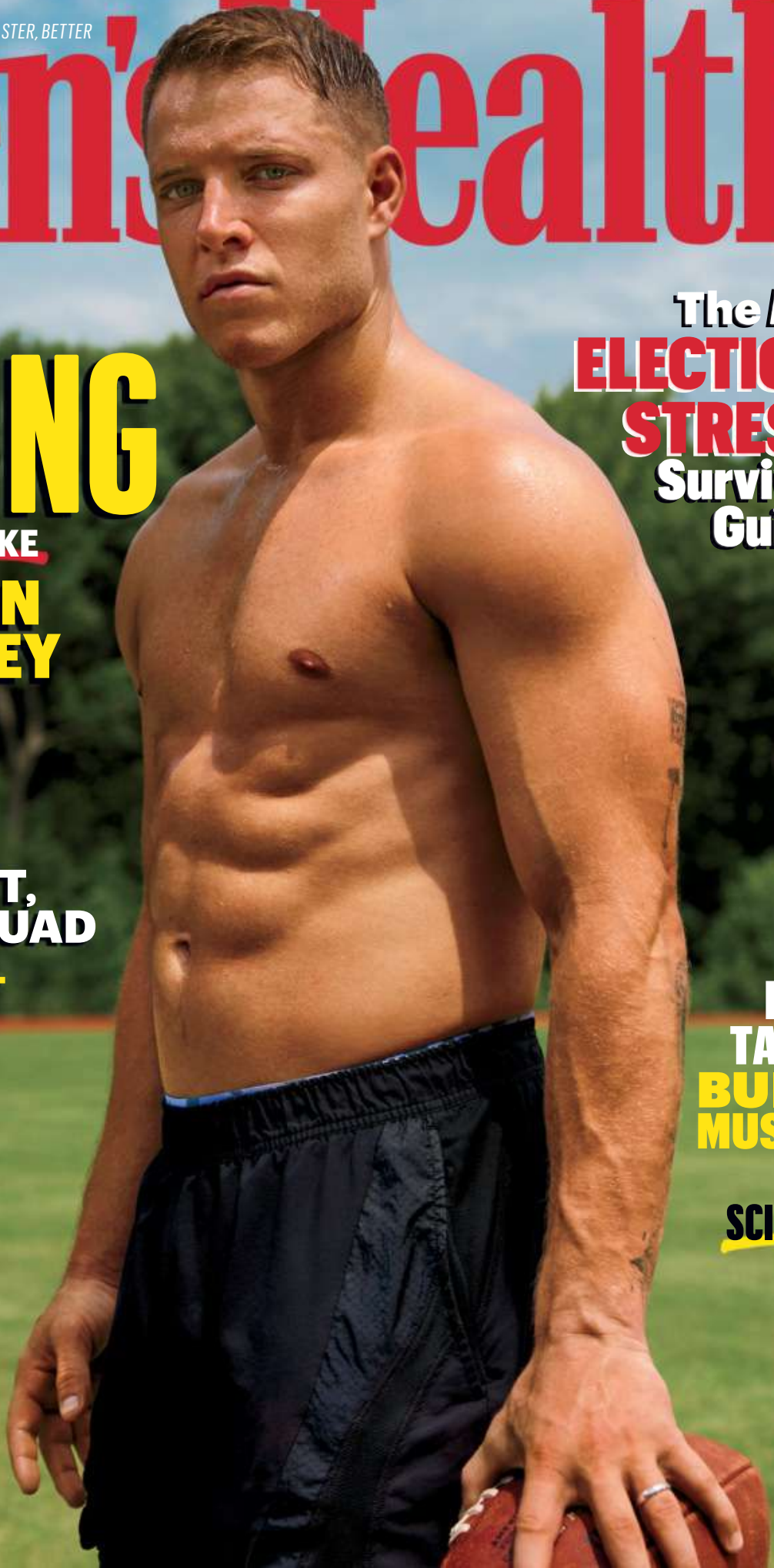
THE FASTEST, FITTEST SQUAD IN FOOTBALL

EXCLUSIVE:

The VIRAL STEROID TREND Targeting Teens

The MH ELECTION STRESS Survival Guide

EAT TACOS BUILD MUSCLE (IT'S SCIENCE!)



Your Moment of Zen This Election Season



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THE DAILY SHOW

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“It’s me attacking the year—instead of vice versa.”

—DK METCALF, P. 64



On the covers: DK Metcalf photographed exclusively for *Men's Health* by Joao Canziani. Styling by Neelo Noory. Production by Crawford & Co. Productions. Special thanks to Proactive Sports Performance and Oak Park High School. **Christian McCaffrey** photographed by Evan Paterakis. **Joe Burrow** photograph courtesy Bodyarmor Sports Drink.

FEATURES

57 GET NFL STRONG

Christian McCaffrey, DK Metcalf, Joe Burrow—three gridiron powerhouses share their strength secrets. Steal their plays.

BY BEN COURT AND EBENEZER SAMUEL, C.S.C.S.

72 ARE YOU THERE, GOD? IT'S ME, JAKE.

Jake Paul conquered YouTube. Now he's trying to dominate boxing. Next up: a higher plane of existence.

BY MICKEY RAPKIN

78 SPECIAL REPORT: TREN NATION

Gen Z lifters are using a dangerous steroid called trenbolone to pump up their social feeds.

BY MATT MARTELL

Plus: A field guide to the booming world of PEDs.
BY TREVOR THIEME, C.S.C.S.

88 THE MAUI AFTERMATH

How a heroic resident and the rest of the community are coping one year after the deadly wildfires.

BY ERIKA HAYASAKI



TACO 'BOUT MUSCLE
The recipe, page 34.

MH WORLD

7 The NFL's all-time-fittest athletes, mental-health must-reads, and Joe Buck. (Yes, we're well-rounded.)

BODY

13 Inside Hyrox, the world's hottest new fitness competition.

16 Two dumbbells. One bench. Fifty-five reps. So. Much. Sweat.

18 6 A.M.: Notre Dame's Marcus Freeman shares his brutal "deck of cards" workout.

20 Why rounding your back during some lifts might be a good thing.

22 The semi-complete user's guide to your kidneys.

24 How one musician cut his weight in half—and had fun doing it.

26 Hearing loss happens. It's what you do about it now that matters.

LIFE

29 Marvel movies are broken. Here's what it will take to restore their full power.

34 Eat tacos. Build muscle. Repeat.

36 The best jackets to shield you this fall.

42 Tents, hammocks, packs—we found the camping gear that *lasts*.

44 Why you should hop into the "Everything Shower" trend.

46 There's one question every dad should ask their kid.

MIND

49 Welcome to Election Stress HQ, featuring some newcomers from *The Daily Show* and plenty of expert advice.

+ 96 Six-Pack: Timbaland

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THE MH TEAM'S ESSENTIAL PIECE OF CAMPING GEAR

MY ENO HAMMOCK.
I PREFER TO SLEEP IN THERE MORE THAN A TENT MOST OF THE TIME.
—CORI RITCHEY



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—TED STAFFORD



STAINLESS-STEEL MUGS TO
DRINK FRESH COFFEE OUT OF IN THE CLEAN MORNING AIR.
—JASON SPEAKMAN



BUG SPRAY.
BECAUSE I REFUSE TO DONATE BLOOD UNLESS IT'S FOR A GOOD CAUSE.
—SEAN ABRAMS



SUNSCREEN!
ALWAYS A NECESSITY.
—LEANNE MATTERN



MY SONOS ROOM SPEAKER.
IT SOUNDS GREAT EVERYWHERE AND INSTANTLY SETS THE VIBE.
—JAMIE PROKELL



MY GERBER MULTI-TOOL IS IN
MY PACK AT ALL TIMES. IT'S LIKE PACKING A FIVE-INCH, HALF-POUND TOOLBOX.
—CHRIS PEEL



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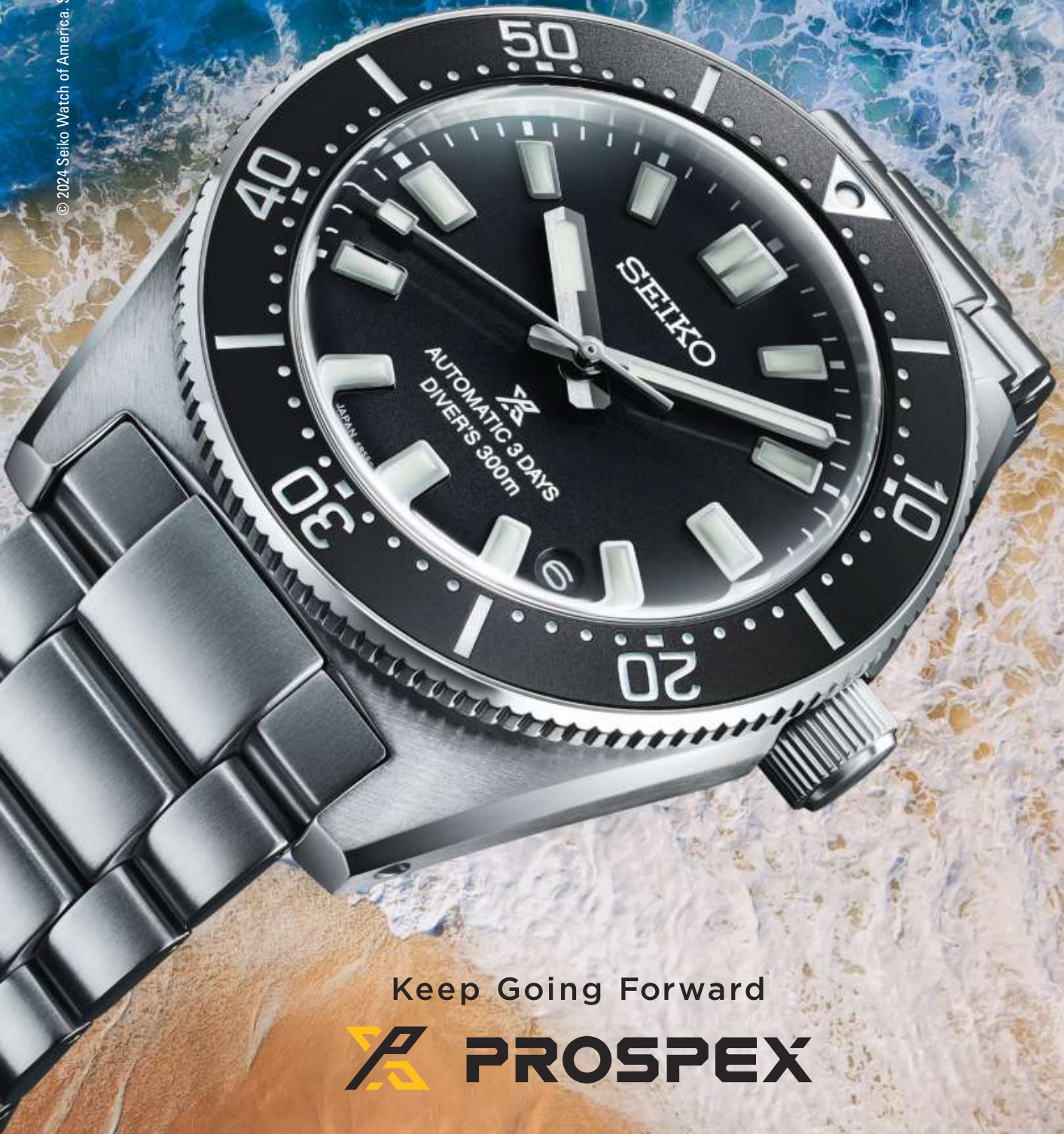
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MH WORLD

BEHIND THE SCENES
WITH THE EXPERTS,
ADVISORS, AND
READERS WHO BRING
MEN'S HEALTH TO LIFE.

BODY BY GRIDIRON

WHO IS THE NFL'S
ALL-TIME-FITTEST ATHLETE?

Steve Weatherford.

Dude was a punter,
into fitness to an
obsessive level.

@cbarry23

I thought a lot about
Walter Payton and
the workouts he put
himself through
all year long.

@chris.bernaky

Jim Thorpe—multi
sport athlete that
excelled in all.

@Luis.Rivera

Darrell Green. He was
among the league's
fastest players in his late
30s and you rarely see
anyone athletic enough
to play corner at that age.

@alek.bee

I'll go with
Bo Jackson.
He had elite
power, speed,
and balance.

@michael.rogers

Ed Reed. Looks like
he can still play.

@marc.lassman





POWER PLAYERS

The 2024-25 NFL season has arrived—and with it a class of athletes who are redefining strength. We're talking about DK Metcalf, a six-foot-four WR who can hit a top speed of 21.66 mph. Or Christian McCaffrey, a run-catch-block RB triple threat who led the league with 1,459 rushing yards last year. Or QB Joe Burrow, who took the "off" out of "off-season" and added a solid ten pounds while recovering from injury. We couldn't decide on "the One" to put on our cover this issue. So we picked all three.

What now? ELECTION STRESS? Is this an actual thing?

—COLIN JACKSON-WHITE

IT'S NOT JUST a thing, Colin, at least not in the way that Hyrox is a thing (see page 13) or an Everything Shower is a thing (page 44). Sometimes it's an actual disorder—election-stress disorder, to be specific—and as *Men's Health* contributing editor Lauren Larson reports on page 49, its symptoms include “body tension (especially before turning on or reading the news), intrusive thoughts about headlines, increased alcohol and drug use... restless sleep... heightened irritation with loved ones and ‘compassion fatigue.’” Larson speaks to Steven Stosny, Ph.D., the therapist who coined the term back in 2016, and uncovers the physiological and psychosocial reasons so many Americans are doomscrolling and catastrophizing and thinking the absolute worst about the candidates (and party) they're not gonna vote for. This is no way to live, folks, and it's no way to channel whatever passion or sense of purpose you have about the issues at stake in November. We're here to help, though. In the Election Stress Survival Guide, we talk to all kinds of experts on how to prevent and manage election-related stress so you can keep your sanity and relationships intact over the next few months. (My approach, as with all things in my life, comes down to moderation: not *too* much news, not *too* much opinion, not *too* much political conversation. Let's see how I'm doing at the end of October, huh?)

We don't really do politics here at *Men's Health*, at least not in the way that pretty much every other magazine does politics. We don't endorse candidates,

and we refuse to get dirty from all the mudslinging that passes for campaigning. It's divisive and depressing, and with so many of us dealing with so many of the same challenges with our bodies and minds (and working toward the same goals and outcomes), we prefer to focus on things that most of us can agree on. Like, say, our love of tacos (page 34). Or our nostalgia for the Golden Age MCU (page 29). Or our curiosity about how Jake Paul ended up in the ring with Mike Friggin' Tyson (page 72).

Then, of course, there's the NFL. The three guys on our covers this issue epitomize so much of the speed, strength, and grit that make football the most exciting and popular sport (or anything, really) in America. As the season gets under way and the W's and L's start to add up, it's a good reminder that it's possible to root for a different team than your friends and neighbors and still stay on speaking terms. So long as you all love the sport, there's plenty you can agree on, right? Might be worth keeping in mind in November.

Richard Dorment, Editor-in-Chief

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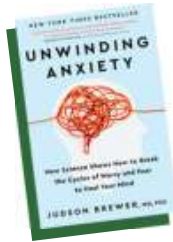
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MH EXPERTS HAVE YOU COVERED

THE THINKING MAN'S TO-READ LIST

To help fight the stress of *everything*, maybe it's time to pull from our collection of the 14 best books about mental health, according to therapists.



If you're a doomscroller, try: **Unwinding Anxiety**, by Judson Brewer, M.D., Ph.D.

Recommended by *MH* columnist Kier Gaines: "Dr. Brewer lays out, in great detail, how anxiety affects the brain, and useful tools to cope."



If you're generally bummed out, try: **When Things Fall Apart**, by Pema Chödrön

Recommended by *MH* advisor Avi Klein, L.C.S.W.: "This book helped me through a difficult moment in my life by showing me the rich possibilities for growth."



If you're stuck, try: **The Big Leap**, by Gay Hendricks

Recommended by *MH* advisor Gregory Scott Brown, M.D.: "I recommend this book if you are afraid to take the next move toward accomplishing your goals."



STAN TAO

STATS:

AGE: 57

OCCUPATION:

Orthopedic surgeon

LOCATION:

Alpharetta, Georgia

FOOD I CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT

Pasta.

HOW I STAY MOTIVATED

Staying connected with like-minded friends and family.

IN MY GYM BAG

iPhone, towel, water bottle, protein bar, change of clothes.

DREAM WORKOUT PARTNER

The Rock.

MY PUMP-UP JAM

Anything by Young Jeezy.

WHAT MAKES ME FEEL STRONG

When my inner circle is happy.

MY NUTRITION GOAL

Increase the frequency of healthier home-cooked meals.

THE BEST ADVICE I'VE BEEN GIVEN

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31%



GREGOLSEN & KEVIN BURKHARDT

34.3%



CRIS COLLINSWORTH & MIKE TIRICO

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TONY ROMO & JIM NANTZ

25%



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The author grinding out lunges during the New York City Hyrox race.



IS HYROX WORTH ALL THE HYPE?

Move over, CrossFit. A new (and friendlier) brand of functional-fitness

competition is currently sweeping the nation. BY BRETT WILLIAMS, NASM

THE SUN BEATS DOWN, stadium jams from Skrillex and Imagine Dragons blare, and hordes of scantily clad people throng around me—stretching instead of dancing. It's the first day of June, and I'm at Manhattan's Pier 76 along with more than 5,300 other competitors for Hyrox, the racing phenomenon and *new new* thing in fitness. I'm working up a sweat just weaving through the masses to reach the warmup

corral inside a giant hangar next to the Hudson River before my 11:30 heat time.

We've signed up to tackle a series of eight movement stations connected by one-kilometer runs, a competitive mash-up of a CrossFit event, a half marathon, and an urban obstacle race. There's a mixture of cardio work (SkiErgs and rowers), strength challenges (sled pushes and pulls and farmer's



carries), a CrossFit staple (wall balls), and flat-out punishments (walking sand-bag lunges and burpee broad jumps). The exercises are meant to be approachable for all gymgoers, but they're still tough. The average Hyrox finishing time is about an hour and a half. I'm aiming to be faster.

By 11:20, my heat of more than 20 guys is raring to go. I'm running in the open individual division, so it's all men. (You can also race with a partner or four-person relay team and mix women and men together.) There are the lean, muscular guys you'd expect at any masochistic fitness event, but there are other bods, too, guys sporting knee braces and bellies. The clock hits zero, and it's a 1K sprint to the first station, the SkiErg. I blast through 1,000 meters but am feeling fried already.

HYROX STARTED AS an idealistic concept: an event in which everyday exercisers could share the same space as top athletes and where anyone could conceivably tackle every aspect of the course. This dynamic already exists in CrossFit's annual Open event and in road and trail running races, but Hyrox cofounder and CEO Christian Toetzke, a German endurance-racing fiend who organized events for years, believed he could create a hybrid cardio and strength fitness race with broader appeal. In 2015, he teamed up with fellow fitness junkie and former Olympic field-hockey champion Moritz Fürste to set out to engineer a new functional-fitness race.

The duo brainstormed all kinds of



exercises and eventually chose eight that test strength, power, and endurance. You work through key natural movement patterns (push, pull, run, throw, and carry). Running is the connective tissue for the exercises because (almost) everyone can do it and it's a good test of cardio. In selecting exercises, Toetzke and Fürste also had to factor in whether moves could be assessed quickly by course officials. Plus, the moves also needed to be (relatively) safe to do under fatigue and couldn't be more difficult for women than for men. Box jumps were nixed for the first reason, and monkey bars for the latter.

The first event was held in 2017, with 650 participants gathering in Hamburg to sweat-test the concept. People loved it and Hyrox took off: It's now on pace to host 85 events for 425,000 athletes on five continents for the 2024-25 season. A slew of partnerships with brands like Chris Hemsworth's Centr and Puma have

added to Hyrox's momentum. *Time* even named Hyrox one of the world's most influential companies of 2024, proclaiming "a new fitness craze is going global." Is Hyrox the next CrossFit or something even bigger?

AFTER THE SKIERG, I'm gasping for oxygen as I hit the running loop again. It's chaotic as racers flow in and out of the event space and I can't remember if I'm supposed to run two or three loops each round. I'm pretty sure I skip a lap on the way to the sled push. (Hey, it's hard to count when you're out of breath!) After gutting out the sled push and sled pull and subsequent runs, I trudge over to do 100 meters of burpee broad jumps, my toughest challenge of the day.

From the SkiErg to wall balls to all those burpee broad jumps, Hyrox was always destined to be compared to CrossFit (minus the hard-to-master Olympic lifts). Yet, while Hyrox trumpets itself as a race "for



► The start line (below left); sled pushes test strength (far left); and farmer's carries forge stamina (left). Recovery ice-baths (below)

GET YOUR HYROX ON!

Add a dose of Hyrox to your own workouts (and prep for your first Hyrox race, too!) by mixing in these three moves from David Magida. Do each twice a week.

SINGLE-LEG STEPUP

► Hyrox's 50-meter sled push decimates quads, glutes, and core. Train for it with single-leg stepups: Holding dumbbells at your sides, place your right foot on a bench, step, or chair. Drive into your right foot as you stand tall, then lower with control. Repeat for 8 to 10 reps. Switch legs. Do 2 or 3 sets on each side.

ROMANIAN DEADLIFT

► The 50-meter sled pull that follows isn't rocket science: You're pulling something heavy. Deadlifts ready you for those big pulls—and blast your forearms, too. Stand holding heavy dumbbells at your sides. Push your hips back and lower your torso until it's at a 45 degree angle with the floor. Drive through your hips to stand, squeezing your glutes. Do 2 or 3 sets of 6 to 8 reps.

DUMBBELL THRUSTER

► Prepare yourself for wall balls, which have you squatting, then throwing a ball overhead at a target, by doing thrusters. Stand holding dumbbells at your shoulders, then push your butt back and bend at the knees, lowering into a squat. Stand and drive the dumbbells overhead as you do. Keep the weight light, since your goal is to build endurance. Focus on time, not reps; do three 60-second sets.

every body," it's still a competitive event. Look at Hyrox division winners and you'll see lean, shredded body types atop the podiums—much as you would at a CrossFit competition. Hyrox has an Elite 15, a ranking of the top individual men and women competitors, who vie for the overall crowns at a world-championship event.

Just as CrossFit has its certification program for trainers and affiliate gyms—okay, boxes—that specialize in CrossFit workouts, so Hyrox has a trainer and gym strategy. The company provides coaches at affiliate gyms with Hyrox educational materials, including workout programs, says David Magida, Hyrox365 global programming director. Currently, 2,500 gyms and trainers worldwide are part of the Hyrox network. It's also planning to open Performance Centers, gyms that will have floor plans specific to Hyrox training.

Of course, you don't have to go to a Hyrox-affiliated gym to prep for a Hyrox race. If you have a basic strength routine that includes cardio, you should be able to complete the course, especially since the race setup is standardized with the same eight exercises. That's a big difference from the CrossFit Open, with its constantly varied (and vicious) lineup of exercises.

In terms of the wider group-exercise spectrum, Hyrox sits in the middle. On one end, there's CrossFit and those who train hard and challenge themselves to do ultra-tough workouts. On the other, there are those who love group fitness for its social aspects. But CrossFit can be techni-

cally difficult for casual exercisers, while group fitness training often doesn't truly let you gauge your progress. Hyrox bridges that gap: You train basic moves and can monitor your fitness progress as your time improves. It's hard enough that even the fittest will find themselves gasping, but not impossible for newbies to finish.

AS I HIT THE penultimate event, sand-bag lunges, I can see the pros and cons to Hyrox's open-for-all mindset. Running with all kinds of competitors is thrilling. But there are bottlenecks at the stations whenever slower racers catch their breath. I nearly burpee-broad-jumped into the back of someone's legs and now I'm lunging my way around guys sucking air.

No doubt the race tests stamina and strength, but it's also a major mental grind. *MH* advisory board member David Otey, C.S.C.S., points to those lunges: All told, it may take you 50 or more lunges per leg to finish the 100-meter course. "That's really a great test of someone's fortitude," says Otey.

At the final station of the course, wall balls, I'm exhausted but exhilarated as I squat down on number 90 of 100 total reps, then explode up to heave the 13.2-pound med ball to the target. There have been some bumps, but I'm near the end.

Even as I slow down, I feel myself getting more excited. The crowd at my back cheers, and I dig to find the strength to knock out the final ten reps all in one go. I drop the ball and jog the short distance up the ramp. I'm now a Hyrox finisher, a status that might soon be bandied about the way marathoners or Ironman competitors consider completing those events integral aspects of their identity. I'm thrilled.

For the moment, though, I need a seat, a cold drink, and maybe an ice plunge. This might be a race for every body, but that doesn't mean it was easy. ■



THE MUSCLE SPRINT

Crush all major muscle groups, blast calories, and supercharge your cardio with this dumbbell workout, which has an intense 55-rep ladder scheme that minimizes rest and maximizes fun.

BY BOBBY MAXIMUS

DIRECTIONS: Do pushup reps for 30 seconds, then rest for 30 seconds. Follow with a set of bodyweight lunges for 30 seconds. Do 2 rounds of this circuit.

LADDER WORKOUT

DIRECTIONS: Do this workout as a 10-round circuit. In the first round, do 10 reps of each exercise. Immediately begin the second round, this time doing 9 reps of each exercise. Repeat, decreasing all rep counts by 1 in each round. You'll do 55 reps total of each exercise. Rest as needed between exercises, but aim to keep rest minimal.



WARMUP

PUSHUP

▶ **GET IN PUSHUP** position, abs and glutes tight. Bend at the elbows and shoulders, lowering your chest to within an inch of the floor. Press back up. That's 1 rep.

REVERSE LUNGE

▶ **START STANDING**, then step your right foot back about 3 feet. Bend at the knees and hips, lowering until your left thigh is parallel to the floor. Stand back up explosively, then repeat on the other side. That's 1 rep.



1

DUMBBELL BENCH PRESS

▶ **LIE WITH YOUR** back on a bench, abs and glutes tight, dumbbells held directly over your shoulders. Bend at the elbows and shoulders, lowering the dumbbells to within an inch of your chest. Press back up. That's 1 rep.

TANK AND SHORTS BY ALO; SNEAKERS BY NIKE.

► **TRAINER SPOTLIGHT: BOBBY MAXIMUS** is a former MMA fighter and a veteran fitness trainer who has conducted numerous fitness seminars for Special Forces soldiers.

► **MOVE MODEL: JOE SEELEY, NSCA-C.P.T.**, is a California-based trainer who specializes in working with older populations. He's also a member of the *MH/WH* Strength in Diversity Initiative, which aims to elevate trainers from marginalized communities.

2 BENT-OVER ROW

► **STANDHOLDING DUMBBELLS** at your hips, then push your butt back and lower your torso so it's at a 45 degree angle with the floor. This is the start. Now row the dumbbells toward your rib cage, squeezing your shoulder blades as you do. Lower back to the start. That's 1 rep.



3 THRUSTER

► **STANDHOLDING DUMBBELLS** at your shoulders, feet shoulder width apart. Keeping your chest up, push your butt back slightly and bend at the knees, lowering into a squat. Stand back up explosively; as you do this, press the dumbbells overhead. That's 1 rep. Lower to your shoulders and immediately begin the next rep.



4 HAMMER CURL

► **STANDHOLDING DUMBBELLS** at your hips, abs and glutes tight, palms facing each other. Without letting your elbows shift forward, curl the dumbbells toward your chest. Lower with control. That's 1 rep.

5 SKULLCRUSHER

► **LIE WITH YOUR** back on a bench, abs and glutes tight, dumbbells held directly over your shoulders. Lower the dumbbells toward your shoulders, pointing your elbows toward the ceiling as you do. Press back up, squeezing your triceps. That's 1 rep.



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6 A.M. WITH...

MARCUS FREEMAN

The head coach of Notre Dame football challenges himself by training daily and lifting heavy.

BY MARK LELINWALLA

MARCUS FREEMAN FINISHES

his one-mile warmup run at the same place every morning: in front of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, in the middle of Notre Dame's campus in South Bend, Indiana. "I always look at that clock, because it tells me that time's running out," he says. "It's a reminder that time's running out at Notre Dame *and* in life." He walks by the Golden Dome, pausing at the Sacred Heart of Jesus statue "as a way to center myself and feel grateful for this life," before he hits ND's athletic complex for his leg-and-chest-day workout.

The 38-year-old Freeman, a linebacker at Ohio State from 2004 to 2008, is beginning his third season as coach of the Fighting Irish. Freeman steered a young

Notre Dame to a 10–3 record last season, capping its 2023 with a Sun Bowl victory. With hyped transfer QB Riley Leonard set to guide a revamped offense, expectations are even higher this year. Freeman will need to be at his high-energy best, which is why he's going so hard right now.

After a light band stretch to loosen up his muscles further, Freeman cranks out his heavy squat of 315 pounds six times. Standing with his feet shoulder width apart, his glutes pushed back, and bending at the knees, he perfectly lowers his six-foot-one, 220-pound frame with each rep till his thighs are parallel to the floor.

A superset of straight-leg dumbbell deadlifts later and Freeman is on the bench, attempting another heavy lift of

315 for six reps. "I'm usually around four to five," he says of his bench-press norm. "It's a way to challenge yourself against an opponent. I know the weights can't fight back, but it challenges you to see, 'Okay, are you going to get this weight off your chest?' I always have a number of reps I want to finish with, but if I can get an extra two, I will. And I never use a spotter."

Lifting heavy during workouts serves as a two-pronged strategy for the married father of six. Number one, it's his sacred time to concentrate on his physical and mental health. "My days are really busy. The minute I walk into my office, there is no time," he says. "My workout is a way to escape everything that's going on in my head. I focus on the weight and my fitness."



▲ Freeman warms up for workouts with a run, then dominates basic moves like dumbbell presses and leg presses.

If I don't get my workout in, it really affects the outlook of the rest of my day when I don't accomplish that first task."

The second purpose behind pushing his body? His 115 players are watching him closely, and Freeman aims to lead on and off the field. "I think the players have a little bit more respect when you live out those things you tell them to do," he explains. "I want them to see that example of no matter how old Coach Freeman is, he's still in here training; he's still in here pushing his body to the limit. I learned that from my dad, an old military guy, who trained no matter how old he was or how busy he was. When you're younger, you train to look good and be in shape. As you get older, you want to be healthy."

That's what Freeman is doing at the moment, sweating as he knocks out incline dumbbell bench press hoists of 70, 75, and 80 pounds for 12, 10, and 8 reps, respectively, followed by 24 straight glute-ham raises, making sure not to overextend his spine with each ascension.

Although he leads by example, Freeman says he never works out with his players. They focus more on explosive moves (think: power cleans), while he concentrates on classic strength exercises. Freeman is approaching the end zone of this session now, too: a dumbbell chest fly circuit, with the final 20 reps coming at 45 pounds. Once the weights hit the floor, the session is over.

"By the end of a workout, I want to be exhausted," he says bluntly. "But I also want to feel like I accomplished something. That is what my family and this football program deserve—the best version of me." ■

BETWEEN INTERVALS

FAVORITE EXERCISE?

"Bench. It's good for the ego. It's probably the exercise that I'm strongest at."

LEAST FAVORITE EXERCISE?

"Squat. I've had a couple of meniscus tears and some surgeries. It hurts, but it's one of those things that when you're done, you feel like you accomplished something."

DREAM WORKOUT PARTNER?

"The Rock. To be a WWE wrestler, an actor, a father, and a husband at his age and to look the way he does, you can tell he challenges himself."

DECK OF CARDS WORKOUT

When Freeman is short on time, he works through a deck of cards. Each suit signals a different exercise. Clubs trigger bench presses, spades mean chest flies, hearts summon squats, and diamonds equal leg presses. His goal? **Reach 100 reps of each in less than 25 minutes.**



BENCH PRESS Lie flat on your bench; press up 185 pounds anytime your card shows clubs. Now feel the burn.



CHEST FLY Grab 25-pound dumbbells, squeezing them together as you close your wingspan. Want a greater challenge? Freeman recommends using a pair of 30's.



SQUAT Start standing. Push your butt back, bend your knees, and lower your torso until your quads are parallel to the floor.



LEG PRESS Push off on 225 pounds and feel fortunate that diamonds aren't forever here.

► Freeman says this HIIT session is efficient on campus, on the road while recruiting, and even in a hotel room without weights (swap in pushups, situps, burpees, and mountain climbers). The best part: "It's constant go! So now your race is against time."

BACK-ROUND CHECK!

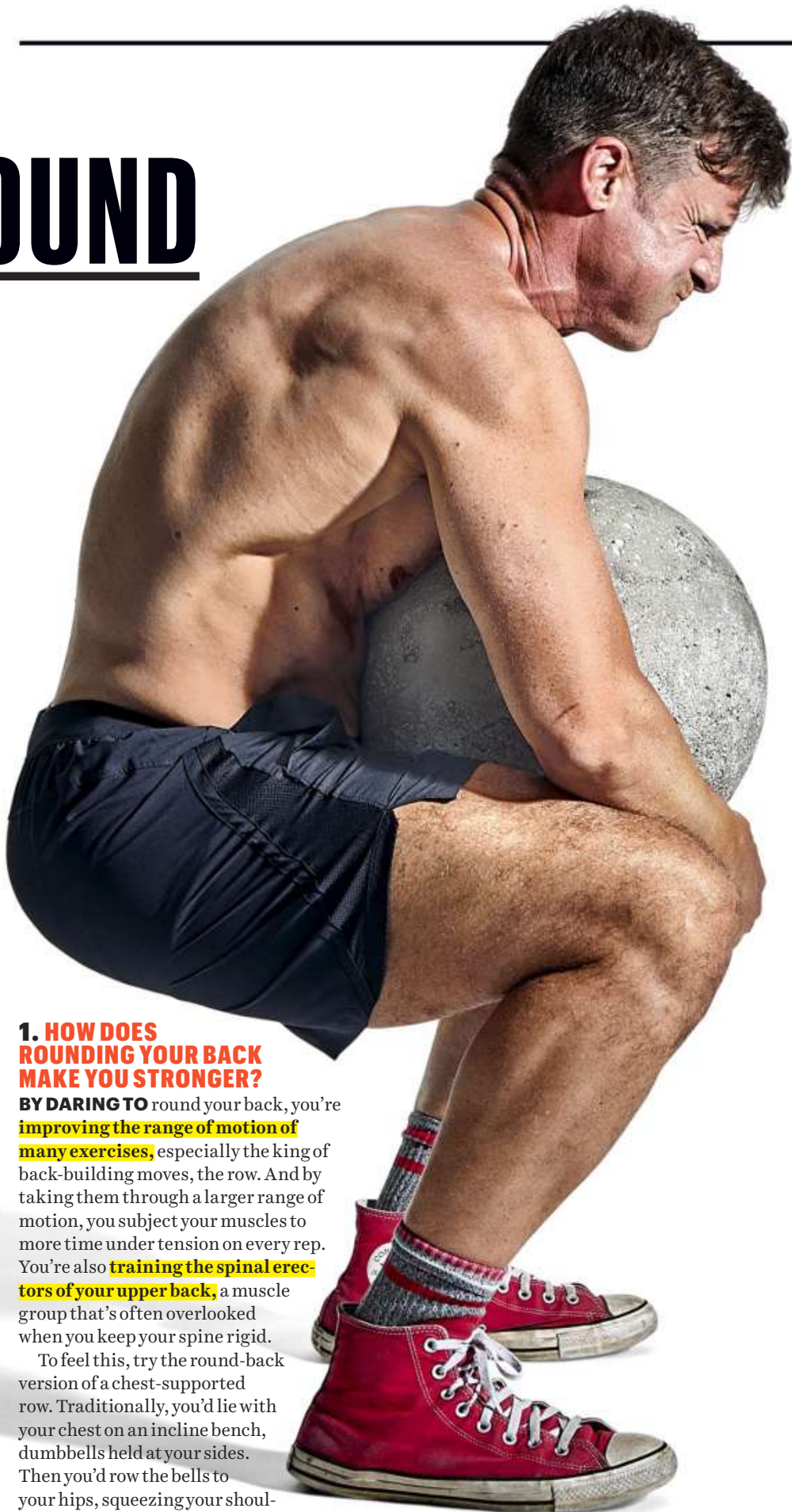
Tap into next-level total-body strength and supercharge muscle gains by learning when (and how) to round your back in the gym.

BY KRISTINE THOMASON

LIFT WITH YOUR legs, not with your back. It's a cue many trainers use anytime you bend down to lift something heavy. It makes sense, too, since conventional wisdom holds that rounding your back with heavy weight leads to injury. But if you look closely at a strongman like Tom Stoltman hoisting a 300-kilogram (661-pound) Atlas stone, you'll notice that his spine isn't ramrod straight at all. Instead, he's almost hunching forward, curling his entire spine around the stone. And if you scroll fitness social media long enough, you may come across an exercise called the Jefferson curl, which asks you to stand holding a light barbell, then lower the barbell while simultaneously rounding your back as much as possible.

Truth is, rounding your back when you lift can be safe, and learning how (and when) to do so can unlock your body's true strength. The technique has actually been used by powerlifters since the 1960s, says strength coach Dan John. It's increasingly backed by science, too: One study found that participants had less compression and total load on their spine when they rounded their back to lift a 15-pound box from the floor.

Tapping into all this power requires you to ignore the ongoing social-media debates between round-back veterans and straight-spine zealots. Instead, focus on understanding the science of rounding your back by learning the answers to these five questions.



1. HOW DOES ROUNDING YOUR BACK MAKE YOU STRONGER?

BY DARING TO round your back, you're **improving the range of motion of many exercises**, especially the king of back-building moves, the row. And by taking them through a larger range of motion, you subject your muscles to more time under tension on every rep. You're also **training the spinal erectors of your upper back**, a muscle group that's often overlooked when you keep your spine rigid.

To feel this, try the round-back version of a chest-supported row. Traditionally, you'd lie with your chest on an incline bench, dumbbells held at your sides. Then you'd row the bells to your hips, squeezing your shoulder blades as you did so. To do the

round-back version, set up with your chest off the bench just slightly, dumbbells held at your sides. Now let your chest roll forward, reaching toward the floor with the bells. From this stretched position, row your elbows toward your hips. “It almost feels like you’re unlocking the ability to use certain upper-back musculature better,” says strength coach Brandon Morgan, C.S.C.S. Do 3 sets of 8 to 10 reps.

2. BUT... ISN'T IT DANGEROUS? HOW DO YOU DO IT SAFELY?

THE TRICK WITH rounding your back is understanding *where* that rounding is coming from, says Aaron Horschig, P.T., D.P.T., C.S.C.S. On most exercises, your goal is to stay rigid from the chest down (an area called your lumbar spine). **Round only from the chest up (known as your thoracic spine).** “The thoracic spine is slightly different in its architecture,” says Horschig, “in that the erector muscles that span the back and help offset shear load to protect the spine when rounded are different from the ones in the low back.”

The easiest way to assess this is with the deadlift test. Set up for a deadlift, standing over a kettlebell or loaded barbell, butt pushed back. Start to pull the weight off the floor without lifting it. Have a friend take a photo of you from the side as you do this. If your back is rounded near your belly button, you’re in an unsafe position. If it’s rounded near your shoulders, you’re ready for action.

3. WHICH EXERCISES IS IT BEST FOR?

ROW, ROW, ROW. **Whether you’re doing a dumbbell row, a chest-supported row, or a machine row, you can potentially integrate round-back training principles.** But the easiest row variation to learn with is the classic seated cable row. Since you’re seated (and not standing), you won’t be in position to get injured during this move even if you round the wrong section of your spine.

Start sitting on the bench of a cable-row machine, hands on the cable handle, abs tight, torso nearly perpendicular to the floor. Row the load toward your belly button, pulling your elbows behind your torso as you do. Then slowly straighten your arms. Now comes the fun part: As

you do this, spread your shoulder blades and reach the weight forward. “Let the weight essentially drag your shoulders as far forward as possible,” says *MH* fitness director Ebenezer Samuel, C.S.C.S. “You’ll feel an awesome stretch.”

4. SO WHEN DO I KEEP MY SPINE IN NEUTRAL?

YOU’LL STILL WORK to keep your spine tight on most exercises, especially if you have a history of injuries, says Horschig: “Every exercise is a tool, so when we are constructing an exercise program, we want to pick out the right tools for the goals and the person.”

In general, it’s best to avoid rounding your back on your heaviest lifts. If you’re taking on a one-rep max deadlift, work to keep your spine steady. Sure, you may be able to deadlift a smidge more if you round your back, but the added ten-pound plate on each side isn’t worth it. “The risk-to-reward weight ratio just isn’t there,” says Morgan.

Avoid rounding your back on rows that start from the deadlift position, too. So if you’re doing a bent-over barbell row or gorilla row, aim to keep your spine in neutral, eliminating any possibility that the weight can pull your spine into poor position.

5. CAN ANY STRETCHES IMPROVE MY ROUND-BACK STRENGTH CAPABILITIES?

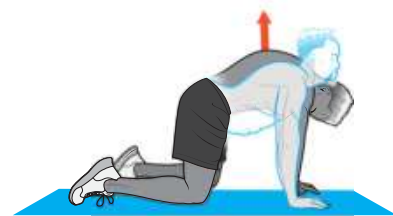
YOUR PATH TO a round back starts with a **quintessential yoga stretch: the cat-cow.** To do it, get on all fours, hands directly below shoulders, knees below hips. Then spread your shoulder blades and round your back up toward the ceiling. Slowly reverse the movement, then arch your back and squeeze your shoulder blades hard. Work back and forth between these 2 positions for 4 sets of 3 to 5 reps.

You’re taking your spine through a great range of motion while doing this and also exposing your individual vertebrae to the movements they’re capable of. The best part: **You can do this every day, continually building comfort with your back in a rounded position.**

The end result: You’ll look and feel better—and be fully prepared for the next time your bestie wants to move a couch out of the apartment. ■

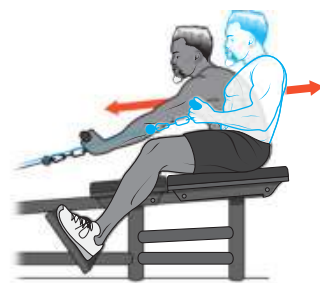
MASTER THE CURVE

Start your round-back-training journey with these three exercises.



CAT-COW

This simple stretch takes your spine through a full range of motion. Start on all fours, hands directly below your shoulders, then arch your back and squeeze your shoulder blades. Round your back and spread them. That’s 1 rep; do reps for 60 seconds.



CABLE STRETCH ROW

Sit in a cable-row station, hands grasping the bar, abs and shoulders tight. Keeping your abs perpendicular to the floor, let the weight pull your shoulders forward, then squeeze your shoulder blades, drive your shoulders back, and row to your belly button. That’s 1 rep; do 3 sets of 8 to 12.



INCLINE-BENCH REACH ROW

Lie with your abs on a bench set to a 30 degree incline, chest off the bench, dumbbells held in both hands. Let your upper back round downward, then flex your abs and row the bells to your hips. Hold, then return to the start. That’s 1 rep; do 3 sets of 8 to 12.

THE SEMI-COMPLETE USER'S GUIDE TO...

YOUR **KIDNEYS**

Protein's bad! You're drinking too much water (or maybe not enough?)!

Our experts set the record straight on what keeps these filters going.

BY KEVIN DUPZYK



▶ **WHAT THEY DO**

THE KIDNEYS HAVE a few important jobs, but primarily they're waste-removal experts. Inside your kidneys, blood passes through filtering units called nephrons. The nephrons remove excess nutrients like salts and potassium and send them to the bladder to be peed out.

▶ **HOW TO KNOW IF THEY'RE OKAY OR NOT**

YOU CAN HAVE pretty advanced kidney problems without any symptoms, says Blaise Abramovitz, D.O., a nephrologist with the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Mercy Hospital.

If waste buildup and high blood pressure reduce these organs' function, you can end up with fatigue, shortness of breath, and swelling, especially in the feet and ankles. Kidney decline is often permanent, leading to the need for dialysis or an organ transplant. That's why two blood tests—one for creatinine and another for eGFR—are crucial steps in any diagnosis:

● **CREATININE** is a waste product of muscle metabolism that your kidneys should filter out of your blood; this test measures the remainder. A high number (above 1.35 mg/dL for men) is bad. If you have a lot of muscle or take creatine, your blood may undergo other tests that account for this.

.....

● **eGFR** (estimated glomerular filtration rate) measures kidney efficiency. A number above 60 is good. Your eGFR drives a diagnosis of chronic kidney disease (CKD), an irreversible decline that affects 37 million Americans. Your doc will translate your eGFR number into a stage. Stages 1 and 2 mean you have a "leaky filter" that's letting through things it shouldn't, like the protein albumin. You may need to manage underlying health issues. Stage 5 means you'll be on dialysis until you can get a new kidney. With a waiting list that's 89,000 deep, you'll want to try to stay off it.



▶ WHAT'S ACTUALLY "HARD ON YOUR KIDNEYS"

RUMOR

OTC ANTI-INFLAMMATORIES

TRUTH Sure, but it's unlikely, says Sarah Sanghavi, M.D., a nephrologist at the University of Washington. The most common dangerous scenario is popping more NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatories, like ibuprofen and naproxen) than recommended to train through pain, or taking them in endurance events without enough hydration, she says. Don't do that.

RUMOR

DAILY PROTON-PUMP INHIBITORS

TRUTH Though likely not necessary to drop them. Studies have shown an association between CKD and the drugs commonly used for ulcers and GERD, but there's nothing causal yet. Per Dr. Sanghavi, aside from a couple of rare scenarios, "I have never taken anyone off a PPI they needed."

RUMOR

DIABETES AND HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

TRUTH It's true! Dr. Abramovitz explains that these two health issues bring in three quarters of his kidney patients. The kidneys rely on blood flow through tiny blood vessels in the nephrons. Diabetes damages the blood vessels; hypertension causes them to constrict.

RUMOR

HIGH-PROTEIN DIETS

TRUTH Some doctors tell people to avoid high-protein diets because filtering the waste products created by processing protein requires the kidneys to work extra hard, says Becky Brosch, R.D.N., a registered dietitian for the kidney-care provider DaVita. It's fine for most people to consume plenty of protein, but wise to consider limiting it if your kidney function is compromised.

RUMOR

TOO MUCH WATER

TRUTH It's possible but tough to "drown" your kidneys. There's a limit to how fast even perfectly healthy kidneys can clear water from your body. But the real trouble comes when excess water dilutes your electrolytes to a dangerous extent and you end up with a condition known as hyponatremia. Under normal circumstances, it's hard to drink so much that you overwhelm them, says Dr. Sanghavi. You're actually more likely to reach hyponatremia by sweating a ton over time and then rehydrating only with water and not with electrolytes, too. (Physicians see this in marathoners sometimes.)

WHAT ABOUT KIDNEY STONES?

● **THESE HARDENED BALLS** of minerals usually occur in one kidney at a time, so you'll experience (major!) pain on just one side, typically below your ribs. Staying hydrated can help prevent them. Based on their size, a doc will tell you whether they can be broken up with ultrasonic waves or if you need to take pain meds and prepare to (*wince*) pee them out.

HOW THIS GUY BROUGHT HIS HEALTH BACK FROM THE BRINK

AS TOLD TO MARTY MUNSON

AMID ALL THE debate around body positivity versus weight-loss drugs, science keeps finding that obesity puts your health at risk. At age 35, musician Amandi Brown weighed 400 pounds and had a pins-and-needles feeling in his legs and feet. “It was a sobering moment when the doctor explained it was a consequence of my weight and unhealthy lifestyle choices.” So were his diabetes and high blood pressure. Now 42, he’s cut his weight in half and no longer needs blood-pressure or diabetes meds. Here’s how he got there.



SWAP OUT, DON'T TAKE OUT

YOU DON'T NEED to give up everything you love. I used to prioritize convenience over health. Then I flipped it. First it was **picking better options wherever I was**, like kale crunch salad and grilled nuggets at Chick-fil-A. Now **I meal-prep so I never have to make an impulse decision**. My tastes have changed, and I feel amazing; I think a lot of us check out of the fight before that happens.

GO BEYOND FOOD

I COULDN'T HAVE made these changes without looking into the connection between food and my emotions. **I went to therapy and dug into the mental side of where I was**, asking myself questions like “Why do I continue to choose this if I know it’s not really serving me?” It’s important to give respect to the process of how you got where you are.

RESTORE YOURSELF

AT FIRST, I hit the gym every single day. Now I train four to five days with weights, cardio, and yoga and allocate the others for recovery. **I think carefully about how I’m going to help my body recover—meditation, yoga, cold plunges—so I can keep up with my desire to be active all the time**. This way, the building’s not going to burn down, because I made sure I had enough rest to actually put the fire out.

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SAY



WHAT?

Hearing loss isn't just a thing that happens to your parents. Nearly one in five people in their 20s show signs of it already. And it puts your brain and well-being in danger, too. Luckily, new tech can help. Listen up.

BY JEFF CSATARI

YOU MAY THINK that you won't have to deal with hearing loss for another 20, 30, or even 50 years. But maybe you've found yourself turning up the volume on *The Bear* more often, or leaning closer to friends at a noisy bar.

Or maybe you're like Ibrahim Dabo, now 41, who couldn't hear his lectures when he was in college, so he'd wait until class ended to copy notes from the whiteboard.

"I was embarrassed when I'd ask my friends, 'Can you repeat that?' two or three times," says Dabo. "I felt incompetent. I stayed away from social interaction. I stopped going to movies with friends, because I would be lost."

An estimated 15 percent of American adults—that's about 38 million people—have some level of hearing loss, according to the CDC. Research increasingly suggests that untreated hearing loss can lead to other significant health issues, including depression and Alzheimer's disease.

Hearing experts say that if trends continue, the number of hearing-impaired people will nearly double in the U. S. by 2060. Among 20- to 69-year-olds, men are almost twice as likely as women to have trouble hearing, according to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders. That might be because men may have greater lifetime exposure to loud sounds (jackhammers, Kendrick Lamar concerts). And then there's what fills our ears all the time: The World Health Organization says 1 billion young adults are at risk of permanent, avoidable hearing loss due to "unsafe listening practices," like top-volume clubs, concerts, and sound from their own earbuds.

But here's the irony: While we're used to having things in our ears, roughly 60 percent of seniors say they don't wear a hearing aid because they fear others will view them as elderly and disabled, according to a poll by the hearing-aid maker Siemens. That may be why many of the millions of Americans with impaired hearing wait too long to get tested or treated. Plus, some docs don't see early hearing loss as urgent. "You'll go to your GP with concerns about your hearing, and if you're over 50, they'll tell you it's a normal part of aging—just wait until it gets worse," says Barbara Kelley, executive director of the Hearing Loss Association of America. Don't settle for that.

Among 20- to 69-year-olds, men are almost twice as likely as women to have trouble hearing.

Why Hearing Drops Out

“WE LIVE IN a noisy world,” says Leslie Soiles, Au.D., chief audiologist at HearingLife, which provides hearing tests, education, and prescription hearing aids at more than 600 centers nationwide. “All that wear and tear on our cilia is cumulative,” she says.

Stereocilia are the tiny hairlike cells in the spiral-shaped cochlea of the inner ear that bend in response to sound waves, triggering a signal to the brain for processing. These hairs wear down over time, especially with loud sounds, to the point that they can’t respond to soft tones.

People who need a hearing aid will wait an average of ten years before getting help for their hearing trouble. That’s a mistake, because cilia can’t come back, and you’ll need sounds to be louder and thus more damaging, says Soiles. The resulting hearing loss may increase the risk of dementia.

Frank Lin, M.D., Ph.D., and colleagues at the Cochlear Center for Hearing and Public Health at Johns Hopkins saw just how dramatic the relationship can be. When they tracked 639 adults for nearly 12 years to explore the correlation between age-related hearing loss and dementia, they found that, compared with normal hearing, mild hearing loss doubled dementia risk, moderate loss tripled it, and people with severe hearing impairment were five times more likely to develop dementia. Dr. Lin suggests that all this may be the result of a combination of factors, including your brain having to work harder to process sound, brain atrophy from a lack of audio stimulation, and social isolation. A recent study by his team revealed that people who got treatment for hearing loss (including hearing aids) could reduce the rate of cognitive decline by 48 percent over three years, potentially lowering dementia risk.

Tune Up Your Hearing

FIRST, FIND OUT how much you can (or can’t) hear. Free apps like Mimi, SonicCloud, JacotiListen, and Hearing Number (coming in November from Johns Hopkins) give you a hearing score. If you have a mild to moderate problem, consider an over-the-counter hearing device—a category that hit the market

in 2022, thanks to an FDA move.

Most hearing aids today are inconspicuous (to the point of being nearly invisible), high-tech, and easy to wear.

OTC devices tend to be less expensive and less customizable than prescription models, averaging about \$1,500 a pair, with the price varying depending on functionality. (They all let you change pitch and volume.) “Look for an OTC device with a good return policy,” says Kelley. “It can take the brain a while to relearn how to hear with a hearing device.”

If your hearing changes and these devices no longer help, or you want enhanced technology or service, see an audiologist, otolaryngologist, or hearing-device specialist for an Rx. Prescription hearing aids contain sophisticated processors that dial in to your degree of hearing loss and regulate background noise, and they come with access to a specialist who offers follow-up treatment, maintenance, and troubleshooting. Some even cater to active lives. For instance, sweatproof and waterproof Phonak Audéo Life Lumity hearing aids are great for runners and swimmers, and the way the Oticon OWN IIC is custom-made to fit your ear canal makes it ideal for cyclists and other athletes who wear helmets.

Rx models start at around \$2,500 per ear. Not cheap, but remember, this isn’t just about your ears.

Silence the Stigma

IF YOU’RE STILL hung up on wearing a hearing aid, audiologists get you. “Men are especially hesitant to use hearing aids, because the devices are associated with aging and disability,” says Kelley.

“They feel out of the game.”

And that’s a shame, because hearing well can keep you *in* the game. For Dabo, learning he had hearing loss was devastating. He was 30 and finishing grad school for a master’s degree in applied information technology at Towson University when he was diagnosed with hearing loss through a campus hearing screening. He needed hearing aids in both ears.

“I knew no one my age with hearing aids,” says Dabo. “I felt I had a defect.” A longtime soccer journalist, he stopped writing and grew even more socially isolated. “Every time I wore my hearing aids, I would look behind me wondering what people were thinking of me.”

In time, however, Dabo came to realize that the problem was in his head, not his ears. “I missed connecting with people,” he says. He went to a convention, met hundreds of people with hearing loss, and recognized he was not alone. “I no longer felt like a victim; I felt grateful. I could now participate in meetings. I’m much more productive at work. I can hear the birds chirping. It’s beautiful.” ■

HEAR NOW, IN STYLE

- At the 2024 Consumer Electronics Show, France’s EssilorLuxottica, maker of Ray-Ban and Oakley sunglasses, showcased **NUANCE AUDIO GLASSES**, featuring iconic frames with embedded microphones you can adjust to your environment. Expected launch: fall 2024.
- Configure your **AIRPODS** to double as an OTC-hearing-aid alternative. Apple’s Live Listen feature lets you place your phone or tablet near a speaker in a lecture hall or near a TV set and it’ll transmit the sound to your AirPods.

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CAN MARVEL REGAIN ITS SUPERPOWERS?

Critical savaging. Box-office *meh*-ness. Cultural irrelevance. How did the MCU lose its dominance over all screens, and what will it take to restore it?

BY EVAN ROMANO

Everett Collection, Marvel Studios, Getty Images.

BY THE TIME *Iron Man* came out in May 2008, I was already a lost cause. The *Batman* movies of the '90s were fun; Christopher Nolan's 2005 *Batman Begins* was maybe a masterpiece. But as soon as *Iron Man* landed, the energy was different—and when it ended with Tony Stark proclaiming to the world, “I am Iron Man,” it became clear that everything was about to change.

For the next 11 years and 20-plus films, Marvel Studios sat atop Odin's High Seat. Its movies grossed billions upon billions of dollars, their casts were stacked with Hollywood legends, and people like me (and probably you, too) were *invested*. When *Spider-Man: Far from Home* concluded what Marvel Studios called “The Infinity Saga”—the overarching story of its first 23 movies—it did so with the promise that there was so much more to come.

Then an evil worse than Thanos himself besieged the planet: Covid-19 blacked out theaters and blocked MCU releases for all of 2020. When *Black Widow* and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* emerged to lead the “Phase Four” charge in 2021, things were, somehow, *off*. The epicness of it all was . . . missing. In what was supposed to be a pause before the next classic blockbuster marathon, Marvel seemed winded instead.

Eternals (2021) was a bore. The mighty Thor in 2022's *Thor: Love and Thunder* lacked electricity. *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, and Phase Five's *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania*—they were all just fine. Meanwhile, former big-screen mainstays Loki and Hawkeye were relegated to decent-enough streaming shows on Disney+.

Now, even four years after the pandemic knocked the MCU off its course and one year after Barbenheimer brought movie fans back to theaters, Marvel is still struggling to find a way forward, with the only major projects out this year being *Deadpool & Wolverine* (which itself exists on the fringes of Marvel's running storyline) and this fall's *Agatha All Along*, a direct-to-streaming quasi-sequel to Disney+'s *WandaVision*.

But to borrow the title from another Phase Four franchise, *What If...?*, what if there were a Doctor Doom-level way to



Marvel's Phase Three *Black Panther* (above) and Phase Five *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* (right) are two recent (and rare) successes.

restore the Marvel Cinematic Universe, with all its zeitgeist-shifting, adrenaline-stoking, and get-yourself-to-the-gym-so-you-can-look-like-Killmonger-ing, to its former glory? It's not impossible, according to the experts we talked to—although the task may require a heroic effort.

WHAT IF... MARVEL PUT THE STORYLINE FIRST?

● **BLAME ROBERT DOWNEY JR.:** The actor reset the standard for every gruff-and-tough Batman and Superman film performance that came after his. Downey's Iron Man was complex yet relatable. Superhuman but also human. And Marvel repeated this character template through *Thor*, *Ant-Man*, and many more.

So when Brie Larson suited up as Captain Marvel in between *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*, it seemed like the MCU had bigger plans for her in this vein. The studio needed a next wave of titans whom fans wanted to see again and again, says Dave Gonzales and Gavin Edwards, coauthors of *MCU: The Reign of Marvel Studios*, a 2023 *New York Times* nonfiction best seller.

“Brie Larson looked like maybe she was going to be one of the faces,” Edwards says. “But she was met with this wave of misogyny and kind of recoiled and said, ‘Maybe this isn't what I want to do.’” The Oscar-winning actress did return last year in *The Marvels*—which bombed. You could point to superhero fatigue or the lack of publicity from the stars due to

the SAG-AFTRA strike, but you can also deliver this blow: The movie wasn't good, and even the biggest stars can't carry crummy storylines.

The key to all this is finding a great storyline—and a breakout superstar who can instantly elevate everything. Marvel needs the next RDJ—and it's still trying hard to find one. The studio has long toiled on a reboot of 1998's *Blade*, this time with two-time Oscar winner Mahershala Ali signed up to vanquish hordes of vampires. *Black Widow* brought in Florence Pugh, and she'll headline next year's *Thunderbolts* (which will depict established MCU characters forming a brand-new, morally gray team). There's also *The Fantastic Four*, which Marvel regained the rights to back in 2019 (long story) and which stars Pedro Pascal, of *The Mandalorian* and *The Last of Us*, as Mister Fantastic. Maybe Pascal can bring the MCU back to Iron Man-like heights with his sheer magnetism.

But there's another way to draw audiences, regardless of genre: better stories. A good movie is a good movie no matter whose name is at the top of the poster. Example: 2018's *Black Panther*, a massive critical and commercial success. The late, great Chadwick Boseman was still new to the superhero-movie scene, but the story—a hidden city in need of a new king, with the rightful heir challenged by a vicious cousin who seeks chaos—was legit. All credit goes to Ryan Coogler, who directed and cowrote what became Marvel's first Best Picture nominee.



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It's about execution, too. And that's why it's important to put trust in the talent *behind* the camera.

**WHAT IF...
MARVEL LET DIRECTORS
GET WEIRD?**

● **ONE OF THE** biggest critiques levied at the MCU is that, with a handful of exceptions (Coogler, James Gunn of the *Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise), the studio takes away choices typically kept in the hands of a director. It has been known to storyboard action sequences and effects before hiring a director. Sometimes the credited director isn't even the one overseeing fight scenes. Take legendary horror director Sam Raimi, who cooperated with the studio on *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*. It's easy to see which parts came from him (the scary stuff, primarily) and which parts Marvel wanted (the cameos).

This stranglehold turns some filmmakers away, most notably *Shaun of the Dead* director Edgar Wright, who was long attached to the original *Ant-Man*; it's a shame, since established bizarro-world directors usually make the best superhero movies. Tim Burton crafted the odd and eerie *Batman Returns*. Guillermo del Toro led the dark and horrifying *Blade II*. Christopher Nolan made his (chef's kiss) *Dark Knight* trilogy. But Marvel has largely stuck with filmmakers who play things too straight or (worse) take the whole thing too seriously, and it hasn't always paid off. "I think it's easier to find a team player than it is to find an auteur," Gonzales says.

To recharge the MCU, Marvel should hand control to directors from Raimi's world, Gonzales argues: "I'd be looking at a lot of the indie horror that's been popping." What could Jordan Peele do with Luke Cage? Ari Aster with the Red Skull? Those scenarios might be a pipe dream, but DC hired horror master James Wan to direct *Aquaman*—and made a billion dollars.

As Thor says in *Infinity War*, "Now I know it feels like all hope is lost." But while you wait for Marvel Studios to get its shit together (or not), remember that it has churned out *so many* incredible movies, shows, and one-off specials. Amid the rubble, you've likely missed at least one Infinity Stone. ■

4 UNSUNG MARVEL MASTERPIECES



Blade (1998)

⚡ Before *Iron Man* or *Spider-Man* or even *X-Men*, a leather-clad Wesley Snipes hunted vampires in Marvel's first huge success. Toss in Kris Kristofferson as a wise mentor, Stephen Dorff as a deranged villain, and one of the most memorable opening scenes you'll ever see (blood rave? blood rave.) and *Blade* is an instant classic.

Doctor Strange (2016)

➡ Reluctant hero Benedict Cumberbatch grapples with his humanity, Tilda Swinton, and the formidable Dormammu. From horror (!) director Scott Derrickson, *Doctor Strange* is stunning, weird, and introspective. And Mads Mikkelsen is a villain, which has never not been awesome.



She-Hulk: Attorney at Law (2022)

⚡ We know, we know. But instead of blindly listening to what some randos on the Internet said, watch a couple episodes of *She-Hulk* as the legal sitcom it was meant to be. Funny and clever, the series leans into and satirizes serious courtroom dramas.

X-Men '97 (2024-)

➡ While not technically part of the MCU, *X-Men '97* revived the '90s staple *X-Men: The Animated Series* to immediately become not only one of the best animated shows of 2024 but one of the best shows *period*. War, oppression, power—the themes are heavy, and the characters have range.





STAYING FIT AT ANY AGE

Eating Right Can Help Keep You Looking Great

BEING A TRAINER, BODYBUILDER, and nutrition expert means that companies frequently send me their products and ask for my stamp of approval. Most of the time I dive into research, test the product out, and send the company honest feedback. Sometimes, however, I refuse to give the product a try, because frankly, the ingredients inside aren't real food. And I'd rather drink diesel fuel than torture my body with a chemical concoction.

Like my father always said, "What you put inside your body always shows up on the outside."

One protein shake that I received, that will remain nameless, was touted as 'the next big shake' but really had a list of gut destroying ingredients. Everywhere I read I saw harmful artificial ingredients, added sugars, synthetic dyes, preservatives and cheap proteins; the kind of proteins that keep you fat no matter how hard you hit the gym, sap your energy and do nothing for your muscles.

Disappointed after reviewing this "new" shake, I hit the gym and bumped into my favorite bodybuilding coach. This guy is pushing 50, has the energy of a college kid, and is ripped. So are his clients.

While I firmly believe that the gym is a no-talk focus zone, I had to ask, "Hey Zee, what protein shake are you recommending to your clients these days?"

Zee looked at me, and shook his head. "Protein shakes are old news and loaded with junk.

I don't recommend protein shakes, I tell my clients to drink INVIGOR8 Superfood Shake because it's the only all natural meal replacement that works and has a taste so good that it's addicting."

Being skeptical of what Zee told me, I decided to investigate this superfood shake called INVIGOR8.

Turns out INVIGOR8 Superfood Shake has a near 5-star rating on Amazon. The creators are actual scientists and personal trainers who set out to create a complete meal replacement shake chocked full of superfoods that—get this—actually accelerate how quickly and easily you lose belly fat and builds even more lean, calorie burning muscle.

We all know that the more muscle you build, the more calories you burn. The more fat you melt away the more definition you get in your arms, pecs and abs.

The makers of INVIGOR8 were determined to make the first complete, natural, non-GMO superfood shake that helps you lose fat and build lean muscle. The result is a shake that contains 100% grass-fed whey that has a superior nutrient profile to the grain-fed whey found in most shakes, metabolism boosting raw coconut oil, hormone free colostrum to promote a healthy immune system, Omega 3, 6, 9-rich chia and flaxseeds, superfood greens like kale, spinach, broccoli, alfalfa, and chlorella, and clinically tested cognitive enhancers for improved mood and

brain function. The company even went a step further by including a balance of pre and probiotics for regularity in optimal digestive health, and digestive enzymes so your body absorbs the high-caliber nutrition you get from INVIGOR8.

While there are over 3500 testimonials on Amazon about how INVIGOR8 "gave me more energy and stamina" and "melts away abdominal fat like butter on a hot sidewalk", what really impressed me was how many customers raved about the taste. So I had to give it a try.

When it arrived I gave it the sniff test. Unlike most meal replacement shakes it smelled like whole food, not a chemical factory. So far so good. Still INVIGOR8 had to pass the most important test, the taste test.

And INVIGOR8 was good. Better than good. I could see what Zee meant when he said his clients found the taste addicting.

I also wanted to see if Invigor8 would help me burn that body fat I'd tried to shave off for years to achieve total definition.

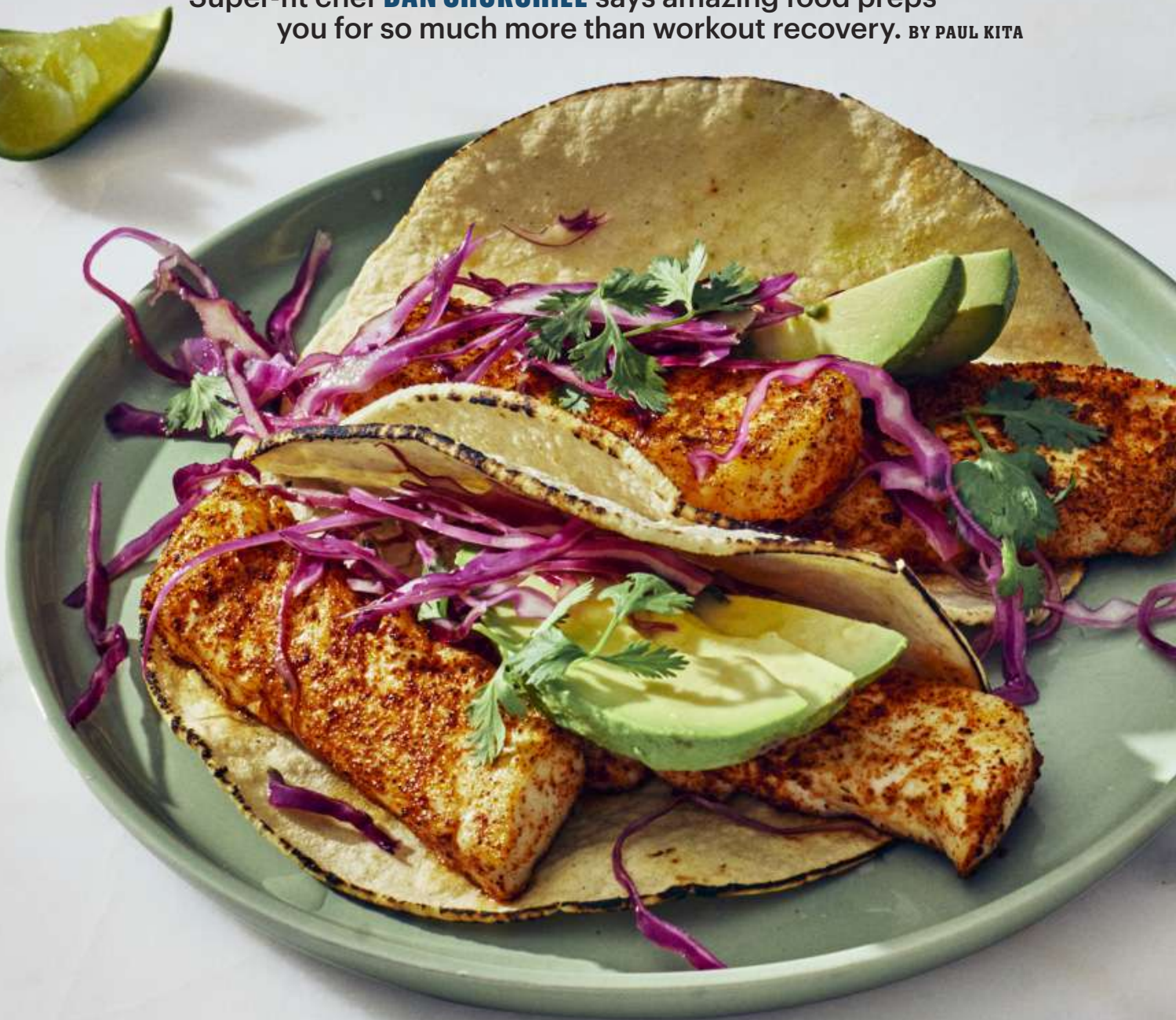
Just a few weeks later I'm pleased to say, shaving that last abdominal fat from my midsection wasn't just easy. It was delicious.

Considering all the shakes I've tried I can honestly say that the results I've experienced from INVIGOR8 are nothing short of astonishing.

A company spokesperson confirmed an exclusive offer for Men's Health readers: if you order INVIGOR8 this month, you'll receive \$10 off your first order by using promo code "**MEN**" at checkout. Plus, the company offers a 100% No-Hassle, Money-Back Guarantee. If you're in a rush to burn fat, restore lean muscle and boost your stamina and energy you can order INVIGOR8 today at DrinkInvigor8.com or by calling 1-800-958-3392.

TACOS, BUT FOR MUSCLE

Super-fit chef **DAN CHURCHILL** says amazing food preps you for so much more than workout recovery. BY PAUL KITA



CHEF DAN CHURCHILL was supposed to be a cook at the Osprey in Brooklyn for only a few months. This was back in 2013, and the Australian expat was busy building recipes for Chris Hemsworth's Centr app, writing cookbooks (*Eat Like a Legend* is his latest), and recording his podcast, *The Epic Table*. But then people loved his food so much that the Osprey's owners asked him to stick around. He agreed, largely because of his lifetime dedicated to health and fitness. "Eating well and working out keep me strong and able to take on new challenges with a greater sense of perspective," Churchill says. For fitness, that's been surfing, rugby, HIIT, and marathon training. For food, that's long been fresh, high-protein meals that are easy to pull off—like these tacos, which taste especially awesome after any workout.



LIGHTNING-QUICK FISH TACOS WITH SUPER SLAW

This recipe comes from Churchill's *Eat Like a Legend* (out now).

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- 2 TSP GARLIC POWDER
- 2 TSP SMOKED PAPRIKA
- ½ TSP CHILI POWDER
- 1 LB RED SNAPPER OR TILAPIA, CUT INTO 1-INCH-THICK STRIPS
- 1 CUP SHREDDED RED CABBAGE
- ¼ CUP CHOPPED CILANTRO
- ½ CUP LIME JUICE
- 2 TBSP OLIVE OIL
- 8 CORN TORTILLAS
- 1 SLICED AVOCADO

HOW TO MAKE IT

- 1.** In a medium bowl, mix the garlic powder, paprika, chili powder, and ½ tsp each kosher salt and black pepper. Add the fish and toss to coat well.
- 2.** In a separate medium bowl, combine the cabbage, cilantro, and lime juice. Season with salt and set aside.
- 3.** In a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high, heat the oil. Add the fish and cook until the underside is slightly golden around the edges, about 2 minutes. Flip the fish and cook till cooked through, 30 seconds to 1 minute. Transfer the fish to a plate.
- 4.** Give the pan a rinse and a wipe; return it to medium-high heat. Heat the tortillas, 1 minute per side, in two batches. Divide the fish, cabbage, and avocado among the tacos. *Makes 4 servings*

NUTRITION PER SERVING: 507 calories, 30g protein, 53g carbs (9g fiber), 17g fat

CHURCHILL'S 3 GO-TO MOVES

1

BURPEES

Squat-plank-plunk-jump-squat-plank-plunk-jump. "They get everything," Churchill says.

2

PUSHUPS

"I can do them anywhere, and no matter what, they blow your chest and anterior delts up."

3

CONCEPT2 SKIERG

The machine mimics the movement (and intensity) of cross-country skiing. "That thing is just a lot of fun," he says.



THE RISE OF FALL JACKETS

American Sports Story star
JOSH RIVERA tries on the season's best.



HAPPY-HOUR HERO

Levi's updates the varsity jacket with a corduroy blend that's warm enough for cooler temps and looks sharp. Throw it over a white crew-neck tee to make it pop. The jacket will dress up any jeans, too.

Jacket (\$148) by **Levi's**; T-shirt (\$65) by **Vince**; jeans (\$148) by **Todd Snyder**; watch by **Movado**.

THE (OTHER) GREEN JACKET

Ben Sherman's Harrington works on and off the fairway. It's all cotton, it's vented in the back, and it zips off easily if things heat up on the back nine. Trade the polo for a **Jack Victor** ribbed crewneck sweater for the 19th hole.

Jacket (\$149) by **Ben Sherman**; sweater (\$328) by **Jack Victor**; jeans (\$250) by **Lee**; sneakers (\$160) by **Veja**; watch by **Tudor**.

THE BEST FALL WATCHES

FOR ADVENTURE



LUMINOX FIELD WATCH

This features a heavy-duty Carbonox case and a durable nylon strap that's comfortable enough to wear for hours. \$445

FOR WEEKENDS



VICTORINOX I.N.O.X. AUTOMATIC CARBON 41MM

The carbon case defends against all weather, and the watch's impressive 38-hour power reserve outlasts any fall hike. \$1,375

FOR EVENTS



TUDOR PELAGOS FXD CHRONO

The black-on-black carbon case pairs well with sport coats or full-on suits, and the dials are easy to read. \$5,275



NIGHTOWL

This mahogany bomber from **Bugatchi** teams well with dark jeans and T-shirts. The shearling (that's a supersoft kind of wool) collar offers extra warmth and style but detaches if the vibe isn't right.

Jacket (\$899) by **Bugatchi**; sweatshirt (\$178) by **Citizens of Humanity**; jeans (\$148) by **Buck Mason**.

POWER BROKER

Brooks Brothers takes the peacoat and adds flap pockets and built-in hand warmers. It works with tuxedos and business suits—but also with a quarter-zip sweater.

Coat (\$598) by **Brooks Brothers**; sweater (\$250) by **Bugatchi**; jeans (\$148) by **Buck Mason**; sneakers (\$250) by **Vince**.

THE BEST FALL BOOTS



BECKETT SIMONON LAVAL CHUKKA

These durable dress boots come reinforced with a steel shank and stacked leather heels that last. **\$259**



G. H. BASS RANGER

A lightweight EVA outsole ensures they won't feel heavy (or sweaty) on the job. The leather laces are a nice touch, too. **\$245**



CLARKS BURCHILL CHELSEA

This boot features a soft leather upper for comfort and a chunky yet stretchy sole for support. Pull tabs make for easy on-off. **\$110**





FEELING REJUVENATED

Life really does fly by. Before I knew it, my 40s had arrived, and with them came some new gifts from dear ol' Mother Nature—frequent knee pain, stress, low energy and sleeplessness. Now, I'm a realist about these things, I knew I wasn't going to be young and resilient forever. But still, with "middle-age" nearly on my doorstep, I couldn't help but feel a little down. That is until I heard about the new craze.

It began a few months back when I was complaining about my aches and pains to my marathon-running buddy, Ben, who is my same age. He casually mentioned how he uses CBD oil to help with his joint pain. He said that CBD has given him more focus and clarity throughout the day and that his lingering muscle and joint discomfort no longer bothered him. He even felt comfortable signing up for back-to-back marathons two weekends in a row this year.

That made even this self-proclaimed skeptic take notice.

But I still had some concerns. According to one study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 70% of CBD products didn't contain the amount of CBD stated on their labels. And, as a consumer, that's terrifying!

If I was going to do this, I needed to trust the source through and through. My two-fold research process naturally led me to Zebra CBD.

First, I did a quick online poll—and by that, I mean I posed the CBD question on my Facebook page. Call me old fashioned but I wanted to know if there were people whom I trusted

(more than anonymous testimonials) who've had success using CBD besides my buddy. That is how I found out that Zebra CBD has a label accuracy guarantee which assures customers like me what is stated on the label is in the product.

Secondly, I wanted cold hard facts. Diving deep into the world of CBD research and clinical studies, I came across Emily Gray M.D., a physician at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) Medical School and medical advisor for Zebra CBD who is researching the effects of CBD. Dr. Gray wrote "early results with CBD have been promising and we have a lot of research underway now. I've had several patients using CBD with good success. It's important that you know your source of CBD and how to use it properly."

After hearing it from the doctor's mouth, I returned to my online poll and was amazed by the number of close friends and family who were already on the CBD train. Apparently, I was the only one without a clue! And funny enough, a couple of friends who commented were using the same brand as my buddy—Zebra CBD. There was no consensus as to why they were using CBD, but the top reasons given were for muscle & joint discomfort, mood support, sleep support, stress and headaches, as well as supporting overall health & wellness.

Eventually, even the most skeptical of the bunch can be won over. With a trusted CBD source in mind, I decided to try it.

When I viewed Zebra CBD's selection online,

I was impressed by its array of products, including CBD oils called tinctures, topicals, chewable tablets, mints and gummies. After reading on their website that all their products are made with organically-grown hemp, I ordered... and it arrived within 2 days!

The first product I tried was the rub. Now this stuff was strong. Immediately after rubbing it on my knee, the soothing effects kicked in. It had that familiar menthol cooling effect, which I personally find very relieving. And the best part is, after two weeks of using it, my knee pain no longer affected my daily mobility and it's helping me stay active.

The Zebra Gummies, on the other hand, had a different but equally positive effect on my body. To take it, the instructions suggest chewing thoroughly. This was simple enough, and the taste was, well, lemony. After about 15 minutes, a sense of calm came over my body. It's hard to describe exactly; it's definitely not a "high" feeling. It's more like an overall sense of relaxation—but well worth it. Needless to say, I will be using these again.

While it hasn't been a catch-all fix to every one of my health issues, it has eased the level and frequency of my aches. And it sure doesn't seem like a coincidence how much calmer and more focused I am.

All-in-all, CBD is one of those things that you have to try for yourself. Although I was skeptical at first, I can say that I'm now a Zebra CBD fan and that I highly recommend their products. My 40s are looking up!

Also, I managed to speak with a company spokesperson willing to provide an exclusive offer to MH readers. If you order this month, you'll receive \$10 off your first order by using promo code **"MH10"** at checkout. Plus, the company offers a 100% No-Hassle, Money-Back Guarantee. You can try it yourself and order Zebra CBD at ZebraCBD.com/Men or at 1-888-762-2699.



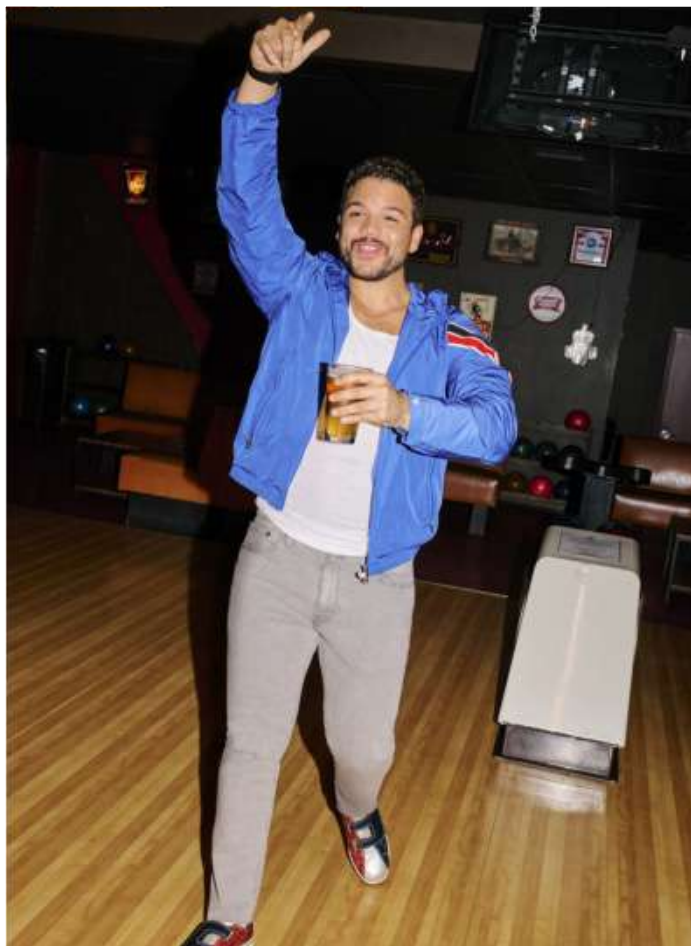
JOSH RIVERA IS READY TO STRIKE

JOSH RIVERA IS struggling with his waistline. Before he took the role of Aaron Hernandez, the late Patriots tight end convicted of murder, for the new limited series *American Sports Story*, Rivera weighed 185. Hernandez's playing weight was around 250. (You don't need to be a sports analyst to do the math.) So Rivera bulked up. "I just worked out [with a trainer] like every day and ate a metric ton. That was really it," he says. And he studied his notorious character. "We go through somebody's entire life in ten episodes," says Rivera of the challenge. "Add another layer, add another layer, add another layer." Those layers included Hernandez's childhood abuse, mental illness, drug use, and history of violent behavior.

Add to the physical and mental stress the fact that at 29, Rivera is still practically a rookie in Hollywood. His first-ever onscreen credit was in Steven Spielberg's *West Side Story* in 2021. Next, he was in *The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes*. Now he's leading a series from Ryan Murphy, the same executive producer who made *American Horror Story* happen. And he's trying to trim down his waistline again so he can get back into red-carpet-ready clothes. "None of my pants fit anymore," he says. "I feel so bad for my stylist."

He describes his regular wardrobe—jeans, a tee, and sneakers—as "suburban dad fashion." But as he advances his career, he's ready to level up his look, too. "It's cool to flex my fashion muscle," he says. Though when it comes to outerwear, "usually what happens is I buy a new jacket and say, 'This year it's *this* jacket.'" Has Rivera found the One yet? "Not yet," he says. Good thing we're here to help.

—NOJANAMINOSHAREI



THE WINDSLAYER

The shoulders and chest of this **Moncler** jacket are tapered, so the cut won't slump. Both the hood and sleeves are adjustable. Wear it with a tank when it's warm, a long-sleeved knit when it's cold.

Jacket (\$1,330) by **Moncler**; tank (\$45) by **Polo Ralph Lauren**; jeans (\$98) by **Levi's**; watch by **Victorinox**.

SKECHERS HANDS FREE **Slip-ins**



HOWIE
MANDEL

HANDS FREE, JUST STEP IN & GO

Introducing new Skechers Hands Free Slip-ins. Putting on your shoes has never been easier. No bending over. No pulling them on. **JUST STEP IN AND GO.**

Exclusive Heel Pillow™ holds your foot securely in place!

NEVER HAVE TO TOUCH
YOUR SHOES AGAIN™



NO MORE
BENDING



LEARN MORE

No Bending Over.

No Touching Shoes.

Just Step In & Go.



OUTDOOR MVPs

Our editors packed, hiked, and camped with one mission: find the 2024 *Men's Health* Outdoor Award winners. Here are just six of our favorites.

BY JOHN THOMPSON



BEST ICE-FREE COOLER Oyster Tempo Cooler

This aluminum box carries 36 prechilled 12-ounce cans with no ice. Using vacuum insulation, it holds food-safe cold temps for ten hours. **\$395; oystercooler.com**

BEST PORTABLE HAMMOCK Yellow Leaf Vista Stand + Hammock

The stand sets up in 60 seconds, weighs 12 pounds, and comes with a travel pack. (Good for the living room, too.) **\$799; yellowleafhammocks.com**



BEST HYDRATION PACK Thule AllTrail 16L Hydration Pack

This 1.65-pound bag can carry a camel's worth of water, plus whatever else you want to store in its multitude of interior and side pockets. **\$130; thule.com**



BEST LIGHTWEIGHT RAIN SHELL Arc'teryx Alpha Lightweight Jacket

This fitted (and hooded!) featherweight armor defends against downpour conditions yet weighs a meager 8.3 ounces. Gore-Tex keeps it breathable and abrasion resistant. **\$500; arcteryx.com**

BEST WATERPROOF SPEAKER Turtlebox Gen 2 Speaker

This Bluetooth speaker is 100 percent waterproof, booms at 120 decibels, and lasts for more than 25 hours of playtime on a single charge. **\$399; turtleboxaudio.com**



BEST ECO-FRIENDLY TENT Fjällräven Abisko View 2

Weighing in at just under six pounds, this two-person tent is roomy, sturdy, and thoroughly ventilated. Also, the eco-friendly design is made without PVC or PFAS. **\$800; fjallraven.com**

► For tons more outdoor gear, check out our full list of winners at [MensHealth.com/Outdoor-Awards-2024](https://www.menshealth.com/outdoor-awards-2024).



Elevate the moment
with Zuke's Dog Treats.



Tender treats.
Real protein.
Crafted in the USA.





FULL! POWER! SHOWER!

It's time to reinvent how you deep-clean.

BY GARRETT MUNCE

THREE-IN-ONE CLEANERS. Body brushes that quick-scour everywhere. Waterproof speakers that blast the headlines in 60 seconds. Why are we all in such a *rush* in the shower? Maybe it's time to slow down with a little something we're calling the Everything Shower. Born out of lockdown and popularized on TikTok (we're talking *millions* of views), this super suds-down is the body-maintenance equivalent of meal prep. Trim, cleanse, shave, refresh, and restore for the week, all in one go, while enjoying what might be the only 20 (or 30!) minutes you have to yourself all damn day.

PRE-SHOWER

This is your prep, in the shower stall, without the water on, and will later require the rinse of the shower itself.

STAGE 1

If you manscape (trim but not wet-shave), apply baby powder to the area to soak up excess moisture and lift hair away from your skin. Dry hair is easier to cut; wet hair can appear longer, so you risk over-trimming. If you have a beard, trim it now, too.

TOOL: Manscaped the Lawn Mower 5.0 Ultra (\$110) has interchangeable trimmer and foil-blade heads, making everything look even, not patchy.

STAGE 2

Apply a pre-shampoo scalp serum to exfoliate dead skin cells, product residue, and other gunk that accumulates throughout the week. (Serums promote a healthy scalp, while shampoo cleans.)

TOOL: Living Proof Scalp Care Exfoliator (\$38) has exfoliating acids, which help remove build-up, and the bottle's tapered head gets in there good.

2 MID-SHOWER

As a rule, start from the top and work your way down so that everything washes off.

STAGE 1 (HAIR)

Rinse the serum (if you used it) and then work in a shampoo formulated to deep-clean your hair and scalp. Clarifying shampoo is a power washer for your hair but can cause dry-out, so use it only once a week. Then rinse and condition, and leave the conditioner on for a few minutes before rinsing to allow it to penetrate.

TOOL: L'Oréal Paris EverPure Clarify Shampoo (\$10) blasts buildup without parabens, sulfates, or dyes.

TOOL: K18 Hair Damage Shield Protective Conditioner (\$36) replenishes and smooths hair while also protecting it from environmental damage, such as from UV rays.

STAGE 2 (FACE)

Use a facial scrub to exfoliate. If you prefer to shave in the shower, do it now. (Washing and exfoliating clears dirt and debris for a closer and less irritating shave.) If you have time, deep-clean your pores with a clarifying mask. Just keep your face out of the water while it sets.

TOOL: Atwater Skin Armor Face Scrub Cleanser (\$26) combines jojoba beads and salicylic acid for a thorough clean.

TOOL: The Shop Shave Cream (\$10) is ultra-rich and soothing on skin and rinses easily.

TOOL: Blue Lagoon Skincare Silica Mud Mask (\$45) excavates grime from pores without leaving your face feeling tight or dry.

STAGE 3 (BODY)

Now use a scrub to exfoliate the rest of your body. If you wet-shave anywhere, post-exfoliation is the best time to do it. You'll have cleared the dead skin cells that cause razor drag. Next, use a body wash to hydrate your skin. Then rinse well.

TOOL: Versed Buff It Out AHA Exfoliating Body Scrub (\$20) uses finely ground pumice plus alpha-hydroxy acids to ensure smooth skin.

TOOL: Philips Norelco OneBlade Intimate (\$30) is designed to shave sensitive areas with minimal nicks—and it's waterproof.

TOOL: California Naturals Super Moisture Body Wash (\$10) is made from soothing and hydrating ingredients.

3 POST-SHOWER

Let us pause to acknowledge that, yes, this is a lot, but you will also look and feel at least 250 percent more awesome.

FINISHING STAGE

Apply a lightweight body gel or lotion from the neck down to lock in moisture. Use a balancing scalp serum directly on your scalp and massage it in to help soothe itchy, dry, or irritated skin. Finally, moisturize your face. If you're showering in the morning, don't forget daily sunscreen.

TOOL: Malin+Goetz Eucalyptus Smoothing Body Gel (\$44) is a lightweight gel serum that deep-moisturizes and has staying power.

TOOL: Act+Acre Microbiome Cooling Scalp Serum (\$68) helps balance your scalp's microbiome and reduces itchiness.

TOOL: Neutrogena Hydro Boost Water Cream (\$12) is packed with hydrating hyaluronic acid and never feels greasy or filmy, even on sensitive skin.

EMPOWER YOUR SHOWER

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Tweezerman Sole Smoother Antibacterial Callus Stone

Keep this in your shower to smooth crusty calluses. (\$21)



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This waterproof Bluetooth speaker installs directly onto your showerhead and runs on the water itself. (\$99)

ONE-QUESTION Q&A

Q: DOES SUNSCREEN REALLY EXPIRE?

A: Yes, both kinds have expiration dates. Mineral ones sit on the skin and block UV rays from penetrating; chemical ones transform UV rays into heat when absorbed into the skin. While mineral sunscreens do not stop being effective, their consistency and ease of application change as the inactive ingredients become unstable. My recommendation: Toss any opened sunscreen after a year and any unopened sunscreen after three. —Corey L. Hartman, M.D., board-certified dermatologist and MH advisor

► **THIS MONTH'S COOL DAD: BROOKS ATWOOD** is a designer, artist, and actor. He's also a cohost of Netflix's Emmy-winning *Hack My Home* and the podcast *Hotel Crush*.



FATHERHOOD BUT WITH QUESTION MARKS

I've always wondered if I'm a good dad. So I did something drastic: I asked my kids. **BY BROOKS ATWOOD**

I THINK IF parents are being honest, none of us know what we're really doing. The best that you'll get out of us, maybe, is that we're trying to protect our children from whatever wounds we may have suffered as kids. We're course correctors.

I know that I don't know what I'm doing. And my navigation map has a big cosmic hole in it. I was raised by a single mother of three, so what *Dad* meant to me was absence. Like most kids, I asked a lot of questions, which my mom answered if she somehow found the

time. But I don't remember anyone asking me anything deep or important.

When my first wife and I had a son in 2014, I was 41 years old. And I still had questions. *What kind of dad am I going to be? Is this going to be fun and exhilarating or scary as hell? How little sleep can one man function on before a full systems shutdown?* As my son grew older, I thought my accumulated experience of keeping him alive and safe would quiet the questions. Instead, they grew with him. *Is he able to process his*

feelings? What age do they stop trying to accidentally kill themselves? No, really, will I ever not be tired again?

Parenting in your head is a special kind of madness. In trying to correct your past, and save your kids from a future you're certain they'll repeat, you lose everything that's in the present. Then, when my son was nine, this thought hit me: *What if I just asked him?*

His mom and I divorced in 2019. So I was regularly driving him from my house in Laguna Beach to hers in Los Angeles. Usually my son and I would spend the two hours listening to music or audiobooks and having surface-level discussions, often about unexplainable things, like what Greek god Jimmy Page would be. (Apollo, for the record.) Whatever it was about this particular drive, I decided to just blurt out, "How do you want to be fathered?" No lead-up. No context. Fully aware of the clunky sentence structure and awkwardness.

I braced for what he might say—or, maybe even worse, for if he didn't say anything at all. Kids, as you know, can ghost you like that. But he took only a few seconds to think about the question before he looked into my eyes and said, "The way you're doing it is just right. I wouldn't change anything." Then he paused, as if he was double-checking himself. "Yeah, I wouldn't change anything. You're a good dad."

I was actually speechless. I assumed he would have at least asked for more video-game time. I was simultaneously relieved and wonder-struck. *All this time questioning your dad skills, you idiot, you should have just asked your kid.* In later conversations with him, I grew emboldened: *How do I parent? What's your favorite way to spend time with me? Is happiness the ultimate purpose of life?* Whatever the question, it's never too much for him—and he is always open to questions that make him think.

I remarried on New Year's Eve 2020. My son is now almost ten. I'm 50. And I have another child, a girl, who is three going on 23. She's fiery and fierce, and she asks a lot of questions, just like me. So the other day I thought I'd ask her a question, too: "What would you do if you were a daddy?" She answered: "Play and clean up poop."

That pretty much sums it up. ■

Promotion

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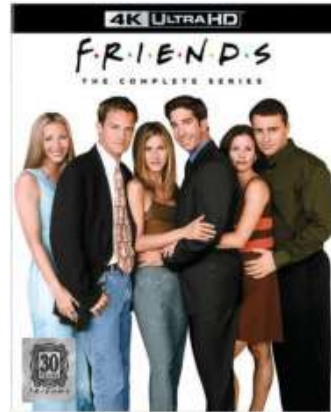
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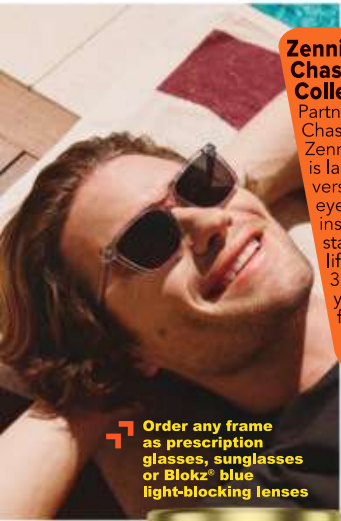


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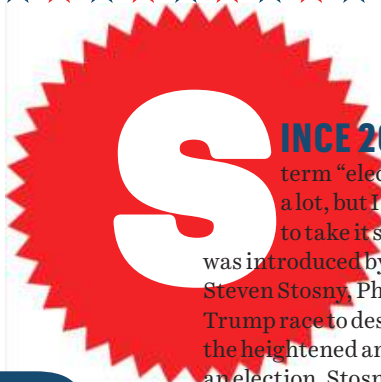




WHY WE'RE SO (SO, SO) STRESSED

Even if you've never heard of "election stress disorder," you're probably feeling the Weight of It All. Thankfully, science can help.

BY LAUREN LARSON



SINCE 2016, I've heard the term "election stress disorder" a lot, but I've only recently begun to take it seriously. The phrase was introduced by the couples therapist Steven Stosny, Ph.D., during the Clinton-Trump race to describe the effects of the heightened anxiety we feel ahead of an election. Stosny tells me he coined the term after watching an election-related video on his iPad. "I forget which candidate said something really stupid," he says, "but I snapped at my wife about crumbs on the counter, which I have never done before."

He began asking his clients, couples who come to him for help with chronic resentment and anger, to pay attention to what behaviors typically preceded their arguments. Many told him that they'd been watching or reading the news before big disagreements. Stosny saw that stress over the election was seeping into personal relationships. In addition to symptoms such as body tension (especially before turning on or reading the news), intrusive thoughts about headlines, increased alcohol and drug use, and restless sleep, his patients found themselves experiencing heightened irritation with loved ones and "compassion fatigue"—they were having a harder time empathizing and being kind.

Early this summer, I started to notice that I had more anxiety and less patience for my friends and family when the election came up in conversation. I expect some degree of tension ahead of any election cycle, but this summer it felt magnified. Stosny confirms that it's not just me. Amid clashing messages about the devastating war in Ukraine, the conflict in Gaza, massive demonstrations, and even an assassination attempt, the nation is bitterly

T-shirt by **Same Day Customs NYC**; pants by **Under Armour**; socks by **Nice Laundry**.

Previous page, on Iwata and Johnson: Shirts and pants by **Brooks Brothers**; ties by **Tie Bar**.





divided. “It’s not even really a *divided* nation; it’s segmented,” Stosny says. “It’s not two sides. It’s many sides, and these many sides are in conflict. All of that raises the general anxiety level.”

Where before I might have been able to vent to my loved ones, now even conversations with people whose political views I align with make me feel tense. In June, for instance, I was catching up with a friend over happy hour when I accidentally brought up the election. I mentioned it offhandedly, in reference to travel plans, but my friend made a second offhanded comment in response. We had entered the election-talk vortex and were soon mired in a discussion that neither of us wanted to have. We vote for the same party and share a position on many issues, but still we went back and forth, arguing over things like the fitness of our then candidate, among other stressors. I felt like I was crouched over a Twister game, trying to keep a limb on so many different camps that I kept contradicting myself and crashing to the ground (conversationally). I mindlessly ate a platter of tater tots to self-soothe.

Neuroscientist Keith Payne, Ph.D., agrees that the many-layered divisions Americans are wading through are ballooning our stress. Payne is the author of *Good, Reasonable People: The Psychology Behind America’s Dangerous Divide*, which will be published in October. In the book, he explains why our minds are so inclined to lock in on opinions, even ones that we don’t actually care much about—and even when the end result is a sinking feeling (and a tater-tot brick) in the stomach that accompanies a sour night with a loved one. “We’re all trying to prove to ourselves and to other people that we’re good, reasonable people and that the social groups that we belong to are good, reasonable people. And as soon as somebody challenges the beliefs that are tied to those identities—or says, *No, you don’t know what you’re talking about; this is a fact and you’re wrong*—it’s threatening to the sense that we’re a good and reasonable person. That’s the source of the stress, I think.”

This instinct to protect our positive perceptions of ourselves is known as the “psychological immune system.”

THE GUYS GET IT

Josh Johnson (right) and **Troy Iwata** (left) are the newest correspondents on Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*, saddled with the heroic task of making this election cycle less awful.



The psychological immune system is necessary for us to function in the world: It is the same mechanism that helps us rebuild our self-worth after going through a bad breakup or being fired. But like the actual immune system, Payne says, the psychological immune system can go into overdrive. Just as a whiff of cat dander can cause our bodies to react in ways dramatic and inconvenient, a casual comment from a friend over beers can cause our psychological immune system to overreact.

The problem is that ahead of an election, our views are constantly being challenged. Every time we glance up at the news playing on an airport-gate television, open Instagram, or hop into a Lyft with a wild-card driver who says he will vote for “whichever candidate will get women back into the home,” we are liable to feel like our sense of ourselves is being attacked. It’s all very stressful, and to simply tune it out is not just undemocratic; it’s pretty much impossible.

“You’re going against a million years of evolution if you try to ignore it,” Stosny says. But there’s hope: There are ways to tame your reactions to headlines, incendiary rideshare drivers, and well-meaning friends. This year, Stosny says, he tried to watch the first general election debate as an interested observer rather than as an impassioned voter. He adds that this may be easier for him because his job involves sitting back and observing couples in his sessions. “But I think anybody can do it,” he says. “You just decide that you’re going to watch without judgment. Your brain only processes information that confirms your judgment and ignores or disregards information that contradicts it due to confirmation bias. So what you have to do is just suspend judgment. Decide, ‘I am going to just watch how these people are.’ And it’s fascinating.”

In the pages to come, we’ll offer you many other such strategies to help you surf the chaos—tater tots not required.



CAN WE TALK?

Toxic politics have infiltrated group chats and basic human interactions. There's a smart way to stop all that.

BY MARTY MUNSON AND RACHEL EPSTEIN

IT WAS 4:00 P.M. on a Friday in 2019—the time the guys typically gather at Bullwinkle’s bar in Brookfield, Wisconsin, to shoot the shit in their weekly “board meetings”—when Riley Enright had a big realization. Enright had brought along a friend that night, a newcomer to the group. In the lead-up to the 2020 election, the conversation turned political—and negative.

“Oh my God, you people are depressing,” the newcomer blurted before he bolted faster than you can say, “Hold my beer.”

“I did some soul-searching,” says Enright, 63. “I thought, *Wow, he’s right.*” So Enright and his buddies called another “board meeting” to figure out how to switch things up. As often happens over beers, an idea gathered steam: set an agenda. Now every Thursday, Enright

texts the guys with a request: “Please submit your agenda subject matter prior to noon on Friday.” Topics range from “how many cigars is too many” to “the never-ending Aaron Rodgers saga” to “beer muscles.” (Enright’s daughter found the agendas funny enough to post every week to @kenzianidiot on X, where they’ve gone viral.)

That’s one tactic for managing relationships. But for conversations you don’t get to issue an agenda for, you’ll need other options. Having real talks with people whose opinions are different from yours is important, says family therapist Bill Doherty, cofounder of Braver Angels, an organization devoted to helping people manage the partisan divide, and there *are* ways to do it without getting pissed off or depressing everyone around you.

After the 2016 election, Doherty and some colleagues gathered about 12 Clinton supporters and 12 Trump supporters to talk. Surprise: Instead of the conversations being a total nightmare, the orga-

On Johnson and Iwata: T-shirts by **Hanes**; jeans by **Gap**. Opposite, on Johnson and Iwata: Shorts by **Lululemon**.





nizers found that they depolarized the participants. People actually saw *humans*, not nefarious points of view on the other side. They even agreed on some things and talked to one another in productive ways. So Doherty and his colleagues started Braver Angels, which has held numerous similar conversations since (and has online tools at BraverAngels.org to make conversations work better for you, too).

“It’s about adopting the idea that we’re going to be different, and let’s figure out how to deal with that,” Doherty says. This allows you to think that a point of view is wrong without thinking that everyone who holds it is stupid or evil. “Polarization is the problem that keeps us from solving other problems.”

To start depolarizing your conversations, he says, first depolarize yourself. Challenge your stereotypes about the other side. “There are going to be 70-plus million people who vote differently than you will, and they’re not all the same,” Doherty says. Ask the people you disagree with why they think the way they do. Listen. “Behind every powerful political view, there’s a story,” he adds. Ask someone about theirs. Ask yourself about yours while you’re at it. You’ll likely discover you’re not in different moral universes. You both care about the next generation, you care about the country—you just have radically different ideas about how to take care of them.

If you think a conversation (or “weekly board meeting”) isn’t working, you have to ask how you’re defining *working*. “If you go into it aiming for a constructive conversation across differences and you’re seeing what common ground you can find, then you have a decent chance of feeling satisfied with the conversation,” Doherty says. “If you enter it with the idea that they’re going to be so impressed with the power of your reasoning and your facts that they’re going to change their mind, you’re likely to be disappointed.” But if you understand how rational people who love their country can support the other side, that’s a powerful way to de-escalate stress.

“I also think we have to take a longer view, that we’re in an era of high polarization,” Doherty says. “It’s sort of like a fever and will break at some point. So the question is ‘How do we personally do our job of not adding fuel to the fire?’”

Not a bad agenda item.



Family 911:

BRING SOME PEACE TO DINNER

FRIENDS ARE one thing. Polarization within your *family*—that’s especially rough. You can love them and not love their politics by using these strategies from the Braver Angels playbook. Decode their role in the conversation. Respond accordingly.

THE GLADIATOR

An alpha who needs to convince you they’re right

SOUNDS LIKE:

“I’m going to straighten you out on politics.”

YOUR RESPONSE:

Head things off (“Let’s not go there”), or try friendly banter (“That was a good one!”).

If you engage, find agreement first (“Things are really a mess”), then explain your point of view with an “I” statement (“From my perspective...”).

Disengage without criticizing (“Looks like we see this differently; maybe we should leave it there for now”).

Keep interactions short to avoid an endless loop of them trying to convince you they’re right.

THE DEFENDER

Prevents you from making a point by tackling what you say

SOUNDS LIKE:

“So you want XYZ to happen”... and misrepresenting your opinion.

YOUR RESPONSE:

Acknowledge what they said, calmly clarifying your position (“I’m not really saying XYZ; let me clarify that I’m saying ABC”).

Gently push back (“That’s not where I’m coming from, so let’s stop arguing about something I don’t believe”).

Disengage if they keep at you.

THE SNIPER

Digs in to inflame, then backs away

SOUNDS LIKE:

“So what does our family XYZ lover/hater think about that?”

YOUR RESPONSE:

Don’t take the bait.

Deflect (“This XYZ lover is going to keep enjoying this delicious food.

Do you want more potatoes?”).

Question them (“Is there a point you want to make?”).

Real conversations are best done privately; in a group, snipers tend to be defensive.



How I Keep It Together:

ELECTION EDITION

—AS TOLD TO MARTY MUNSON, RACHEL EPSTEIN, AND NOJAN AMINOSHAREI



LOG OFF AND CHILL

TROYIWATA,

The Daily Show correspondent

► **YOU ARE** allowed to not watch everything; you are allowed to not read everything. We think that if you don't know, therefore you don't care, which is not true. There is no shame in logging off and taking time to have fun and be happy, even with the world the way it is. Sometimes I just need to get an iced coffee, go for a walk somewhere I can see trees and water, and listen to some Audra McDonald singing Sondheim. Watch Patti LuPone read that and go insane. Patti LuPone reads *Men's Health*, right?

GET SOME PERSPECTIVE

JOSH JOHNSON, *The Daily Show* correspondent

► **I'M READING** a great book called *Outrageous*, by Kliph Nesteroff, about the history of comedy and cancel culture. As far back as the 1800s, people were quoted about how comedians just can't say anything anymore. The lesson is that a cultural flash point may feel pressing because we're living through it now, but that doesn't mean we haven't before. I think the same thing applies to politics. What helps keep me in check is remembering that some of the conversations we're having now have been going on for over 200 years.

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL

DAVE HOLSTEIN, cowriter, *Inside Out 2*,

now on digital, soon on Disney+

► **WHEN THE WORLD** gets big, I try to think small and focus on what I can control. My anxiety goes away when I'm feeling productive. Sometimes accomplishing small tasks is its own meditation. There's a Zen I like in spending a long time on little things: patching the stucco on my house, walking my dog an extra loop around the block. The planet is huge with many planet-sized problems. But people are planets, too, in a way. For me, it helps to be reminded that while I can't heal the ozone layer, I can definitely organize my toolshed.

DE-OPINION-IZE

KIER GAINES, therapist in Washington, D.C.

► **I FIND MYSELF** walking a slim line between “keep me as up-to-date as possible” and “take me out of the group chat.” I try to remember that my brain is not an instrument designed to chug the complaints, concerns, and opinions of the more than 5 billion people with access to social media worldwide. I keep it light with the number of political networks and podcasts. I used to keep ten in the rotation; now I’ve dropped it to three. I mostly listen to international news or pods that don’t lean in any specific political direction. Don’t tell me what to think; just give me factual information.

EMBRACE THE CHAOS

STEVE KORNACKI, NBC News and MSNBC national political correspondent, “big board” election commentator

► **FOR ME**, an election season is busy, intense, and even frantic, and while that does entail some stress, it really just invigorates me. Looking at polling trends, learning the political geography of different states and regions, and gaming out different possibilities just get my mind going. All summer and fall, the anticipation builds, and there’s nothing like the moment those first few counties spit out their results and all of the questions I’ve accumulated finally, one by one, are answered. Who wouldn’t be excited?

SHOCK YOUR SYSTEM

TREY YINGST, chief foreign correspondent, Fox News, covering the Israel– Hamas war

► **I DON’T HAVE** the power to decide the outcome of an election but do have the power to set healthy habits. I’ve found that cold exposure is a great tool for calming the mind. I get into a cold shower or ice bath. And while that might sound counterproductive, around the one-minute mark I start to feel calm. It’s a reminder that you have control of your mind and can train it like you train a muscle.

STAY IRL

V SPEHAR, founder, Under the Desk News, short-form recaps of the day’s events

► **KEEPING ONE FOOT** in the real world and prioritizing real-life events and friendships is key to being successful and stable as an online creator. Like any job, you need to be able to “clock out” and recognize that not everything needs to be for content. Keep something for yourself! For me, clocking out to catch a Buffalo Bills game with #billsmafia or to run around the yard with my two-year-old niece catching bubbles allows me the space to feel human and remember what’s important. Family, fresh air—and Josh Allen. Go Bills!



On Johnson: Polo by **Brooks Brothers**; jeans by **Gap**; sneakers by **Adidas**.
On Iwata: Sweater by **Brooks Brothers**; pants by **Gap**; sneakers by **Saucony**.
Opposite, on Iwata: T-shirt by **Hanes**.
On Johnson: Blazer and shirt by **Brooks Brothers**; tie by **Armani**.



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CHRISTIAN MCCAFFREY IS

AW

He's entering his eighth season in the NFL, but the league's most electric running back is **NOT SLOWING DOWN.**

By **BEN COURT**



EVERY OFF-SEASON for the past seven years, Christian McCaffrey, the San Francisco 49ers' All-Pro running back, has met up with Brian Kula, C.S.C.S., a trainer he's worked with since eighth grade. They talk about any injuries and any niggling pain from the previous season, do a battery of strength and movement tests, and then create a program "to turn CMC back on."

What they're turning on is primarily strength and speed and, when combined together, power. "We try to hit everything on the force-velocity curve," explains Kula. "On one end, you're emphasizing force—think slower moves, like heavy deadlifts and sled pulls and pushes. In the middle, it's plyometrics, sometimes with weight, and on the top end it's sprint drills without weights." For each touch point on the curve, there are various exercises, and Kula curates a four-month program to gradually raise McCaffrey's levels.

We connected in mid-June, just before the 49ers' training camp, and Kula told me the five-eleven, 210-pound McCaffrey is as strong as ever. Although he "doesn't chase numbers in the weight room," McCaffrey is deadlifting in the mid-500-pound range, the same as when he entered the league in 2017. Even more important for a running back than brute strength or straight-line speed, says Kula, is something somewhat nebulous, what he calls "being twitchy." "That good quick twitch is when you apply force, driving hard to the ground, and then fire off the ground rapidly," he says. "Christian is firing on a different level right now."

When I ask the 28-year-old McCaffrey a few days later if he feels like he's currently at his peak, he seems taken aback. "I've never thought of it like that," he says during a Zoom from his home in Charlotte, North Carolina. "I know I feel great, I feel fast, I feel strong. You can call it twitchiness or bounce, and it's because your nervous system is firing on all cylinders. Every athlete knows what that means. It's when you feel like you're *you*."

McCaffrey is wearing a white Nike T-shirt and white shorts, and with his closely cropped hair he looks like a gridiron G. I. Joe. He's introspective and intense when talking about the kinds of strength that playing running back demands. "Whatever that play requires, you need to be able to tap into whatever you need to tap into in order to get more yards," he says. "That's why it's such a beautiful position, because each play has a life of its own. I think the game is very deep. I really do. It's much deeper than what you see on TV. There's an emotional part. Each player is going through some sort of mental battle to win that rep against the opponent. And a physical part. Sometimes you have to be elusive and to be light on your feet and to make people miss and avoid contact or move

with contact. But sometimes you have to put your head down and run through a motherfucker's chin."

WHEN McCAFFREY is McCaffrey, he's *him*.

Last year was his best season ever—and one of his healthiest. He finished with 2,023 total yards and 21 touchdowns and earned offensive player of the year, becoming a dual threat as a runner and a receiver. Currently his career-average total yards per game of 115.5 is fourth all-time behind legends Jim Brown, Billy Sims, and Barry Sanders. ESPN recently surveyed nearly 80 league executives, coaches, and scouts, asking them to rank the NFL's top ten running backs. McCaffrey was number one, earning more than 80 percent of the first-place votes. He also became the first running back to be on the cover of a Madden video game since Sanders a decade ago ("I've been playing Madden since I was a young kid with my brothers,





McCaffrey's training blends traditional exercises like deadlifts with weighted pool work (top) as well as explosive med-ball throws (right) and rotational TRX rows (above) to challenge core strength and stability.

and so it was such a full-circle moment”), and he married former Miss Universe Olivia Culpo (“She always encourages me to do whatever needs to be done in order to accomplish my goals, so that’s made it easy to continue to train hard”).

Despite the trend that compensation for running backs in the NFL has been *decreasing* (it’s a passing league now), McCaffrey extended his current deal for two more years at \$19 million per year through the 2027 season, which would be his eleventh in the NFL. The average career for a running back is 2.6 years, and though McCaffrey may be an outlier, and

perhaps at his peak, his window to win is likely starting to close. Last season’s Super Bowl loss to the Kansas City Chiefs stung. “I legit cried,” he says. “The goal is to win a Super Bowl. My job is just to put my body, my mind, my spirit in the best possible position that I can so that I can help my team win it all.”

KULA AND McCaffrey’s fitness partnership started at Valor Christian High School in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, where McCaffrey starred on the basket-

ball, football, and track teams and Kula, a former college decathlete, coached track. “Christian always moved really well, really efficiently,” says Kula. “I saw him dunk a basketball in eighth grade.” (Later, McCaffrey corrects the record and says, “It was actually the summer of seventh grade.”) The two paired up again after McCaffrey graduated from Stanford and was drafted in the NFL, and they’ve worked together ever since.

While their workouts are generally track and speed inspired and they do three high-impact sessions per week focused on acceleration, max velocity,



McCaffrey is at the top of his game: He amassed 2,023 total yards last season.

propelling yourself or pushing away from it.

Stability comes into play because as a running back, McCaffrey needs to be able to generate that force on a single leg to cut, jump, accelerate, decelerate. For most people, says Dicharry, the nervous system is going to put the brakes on because they're wobbly and not stable on one leg. "You can't put a jet engine on a paper airplane," he says. "Strength without stability doesn't help you on the field. Stability builds the chassis."

Despite all of McCaffrey's athletic traits—speed, stability, power—Kula says his greatest strength is actually something else, his mindset. "That's the captain that drives the ship."

WHEN ASKED how he developed what Kula calls his "extreme discipline and dedication to his craft," McCaffrey says it stems from his mom and dad (Ed McCaffrey won two Super Bowls with the Denver Broncos; Lisa Sime McCaffrey played soccer at Stanford) and from growing up with three brothers in a competitive household. (His

youngest brother, Luke, was drafted by Washington this year.) "We were told at a young age, if God's given you any gifts, it's important to honor those gifts and to do everything in your power to become great at that and to maximize your potential."

It may sound a little Hallmark-y, but talk to McCaffrey about training and about football and you get the sense that's exactly what he's doing, trying to master the position of running back and maximize his potential. All the sweaty lifting, all the wild exercises, all the exploration of space and speed and movement boils down to a moment when it's a running play for number 23 and the ball is snapped. I ask McCaffrey to explain his mental process, the cuts he anticipates, potential holes opening up or closing, and what's actually going on in his head.

and three-dimensional movement, they have added elements to help McCaffrey build even more strength. "All the years they said Christian couldn't run between the tackles," says Kula. "We've all seen him do that, because he's strong, he's powerful, and he's also got breakaway speed. That's a rare combination, right? We can all think of guys that are big and strong but not necessarily fast. And he has the ability to catch and run, too."

Lately they've gone even deeper on force and velocity, and McCaffrey says he's "learning how to have a positive relationship to the ground. I'm working on falling, rolling, elasticity, recoil, and different movements to improve my relationship with the ground." He's added more barefoot work, animal-inspired flow moves like gorilla walks and bear

crawls, and more single-leg lifts and hops as well as gymnastics drills that have him jumping and rolling on a trampoline. It's a lot, but there's a method to the movement mayhem.

To understand why a running back's relationship with the ground is critical, consider the dynamics of speed. "To run faster, you don't move your legs faster; you exert more force on the ground," says Jay Dicharry, Ph.D., a professor of physical therapy at Oregon State University and the author of *Running Rewired*. It's the same idea as throwing a ball with increasing force against the ground—each time it bounces back faster. But you don't just slam your feet into the ground harder, because that can lead to injury, he adds. You have to work on that relationship with the ground and imagine

"I would love to give you an answer, but I have no idea," he says, laughing. "That's the beauty of the position. The more you think, the worse you are. The work is put in in the off-season, in training camp, during the week of practice. That's when you test things. That's when you experiment. When it comes to the actual game, that's when you just let it loose."

He's on a roll and runs with it.

"I look at playing running back as kind of an art, like a painter. When they're going to paint something, sometimes they don't always know what they're going to paint. They just let their mind and instincts lead the brush. That's kind of like being a running back. You have rules with your footwork, and your aiming point matters, and there are different intricacies, but once you get to that second level, it's completely mindless. Every move you make, it's a dance. You're trying to make people go the way that you're not going in order to score, and you're doing it in split seconds while people are trying to take your head off. It's instinctual.

It's about fighting for those minuscule percentages of winning and losing or of getting four yards rather than three on a specific play or making that guy miss or getting tackled by an arm." And just when you think you have the answers, you get hit in the ribs by someone running 22 miles an hour. "Football is a very humbling game, because you can try hard to do everything right and still fail."

McCaffrey has had his share of hard hits and injuries, but he says he's never had a concussion. "Whether you get hit or not, you go through stresses throughout the season that can alter your brain's performance, sleep, focus. So I go for brain imaging twice every year," he says. Same approach for blood work and other testing. "I'm constantly reading data so that if I do have to make an adjustment to fix something, I'm able to do it and I'm not just guessing."

As you'd expect of someone who gets hit a lot, McCaffrey is somewhat of a recovery aficionado, having tried everything from dry needling and cryotherapy to hands-on massage and compression. "I look at recovery like the Cheesecake Factory menu," he says. "You have a million different things and you have to order carefully and choose exactly what's best based on the circumstances. You have to be careful not to over-order or under-order—finding that balance is

important." His most trusted recovery order is sleep. Despite recently getting married (or maybe because of it), he says he goes to bed as early as possible, often between 9:00 P.M. and 10:00 P.M., and he gets up at 6:15 A.M. "Sleep is the most important thing you can do for your body. You can train all you want and treat all you want, but if you don't sleep, your body is going to break down."

It was partly that fear of breaking down that led McCaffrey to train with big-wave surfer Laird Hamilton in 2021. Hamilton does battle in the trenches with a different kind of giant and has developed his own pool-based breath work and fitness program. Some of the drills are intense—weighted swims clutching one dumbbell while holding your breath to teach your lungs how to operate without air. "For big-wave surfers, who operate in an unpredictable environment, it can be life or death," says McCaffrey. "I just try and keep up." But it gives him an edge, too: "Everything is energy. If you can conserve energy better than the opponent, you can run longer, last longer. The fourth quarter is when games are won, so that's a big deal."

McCaffrey also learned to use breath work, inhaling through his nose to calm his nervous system. The guy with the twitchy body, the elite power, and the fierce desire to constantly improve found that water provides a different sensory benefit. On recovery days, he likes to perform gentle exercises that relieve pressure on his spine and joints. He told me about one of his favorites, which he often does in his pool at home: Grab two ten-pound dumbbells, inhale through your nose, and sink 12 feet down. When your feet touch the bottom, you jump up lightly and do a jumping jack. Then you breach the surface, take another breath, do a slow backflip, and let the dumbbells pull you back down. "I do five or ten reps for three or five sets, depending on how I feel," he says. "I find so much peace in the water. It's relaxing, quiet, meditative almost. My dad always told me between plays, 'Breathe, focus, explode.' On my off days in the water, it's the breathe and focus state. I'm mentally, emotionally, and physically unwinding, so the next day I can explode." ■

BEN COURT is the executive editor of Men's Health. He is hoping to pick CMC for his fantasy football team.

CMC MUSCLE FACTORY

THESE MOVES FROM
BRIAN KULA, C.S.C.S., BUILD
**FUNCTIONAL TOTAL-BODY
STRENGTH AND STABILITY.**

3D LUNGES

● CMC does a lunge series in eight directions, but doing three variations that target multiple planes of movement—forward and back, side to side, and transverse—is a good start. First do a forward lunge, then do a lateral lunge. Follow with a transverse lunge: Open your hip and step diagonally back to the right, leaning into your right foot. Do 3 sets of 8 to 10 reps for each variation on each side.

ANIMAL FLOWS

● To train his core as well as foot and hand grip, McCaffrey does dynamic animal movements like bear-crawl jumps and donkey kicks, sometimes on a trampoline. A good place to start is with an inchworm-bear-crawl flow: From standing, bend over and touch the ground, then walk your hands out until you're in a plank. Next, shift forward on all fours, like a bear, and crawl 10 yards. Reverse the movement back to standing. Do 10 reps.

BOUNCE FIRE DRILLS

● The key when working on speed is to do low volume at peak intensity. Warm up with 3 sets of 20 yards of hops, skips, high-knees, and butt-kicks, going 35 percent to 50 percent max. Next, sprint in place as fast as you can for 3 seconds and then do a 20-yard dash as fast as you can. Rest for 2 minutes and repeat 4 times.



THE WRECKING- BALL WIDEOUT

DK METCALF pursues an old-school path to hardcore strength:

PUSH. YOUR. LIMITS. By EBENEZER SAMUEL, C.S.C.S.



GET READY FOR

DK Metcalf's dirty secret. You'd think a six-foot-four, 235-pound slab of muscle would eat some high-protein, everything-bad-free diet, especially when priming for the biggest season of his football life. But as Metcalf speaks on this Zoom in late April, he's... bingeing fast food. "It's vacation," he says between bites, "so I'm having french fries." He goes on. "I'll describe it as this: I'm a fat-ass at heart. If I didn't play football, I would not care about my body."

Not that anyone will believe him, because whenever DK (real name: DeKaylin) Metcalf takes the field for the Seattle Seahawks, he stands out, thanks to a stunning blend of Thor-level size and Black Panther athleticism. Sometimes Metcalf is all explosive strength, the kind that fueled his 73-yard catch-and-run-away from two Cowboys corners last year. Other times he's channeling mental strength, the kind that drives a man to chase down a streaking safety half his size on an interception return (Arizona's Budda Baker in a still-legendary 2020 play). And then there's Metcalf's personal favorite show of strength, the brute force he uses to block, which was on display when he fork-lifted Commanders DB Kamren Curl (who's also superbly jacked) yards upon yards past the sidelines during a game last season.

How did Metcalf build this strength? By ignoring conventional fitness ideas like "recovery" and "load management" and focusing on something much simpler: training f*cking hard. Today's strength-and-conditioning landscape often leans into complicated gym-jargon principles that encourage athletes and average joes alike *not* to push their limits. Metcalf isn't down with that. Two years ago, the league's wrecking-ball wideout took a sledgehammer to his workouts, ditching Instagram-sexy exercises and ideas like heart-rate variability. His new template: He maxes out his muscles and engine in every sweat sesh. "Basic lifts where I can see where I am weight-wise and test my strength," says Metcalf, who is a Lululemon ambassador, "but also I feel like I'm grimy and getting after it in the gym."

It's an old-school approach that draws on his college and high school days (and allows for french fries)—and it's working. Metcalf arrives in 2024 fresh off back-to-back 1,000-yard receiving campaigns, even though he spent last season catching passes from journeymen Geno Smith and Drew Lock.



The scary part: His next step might be even more impressive.

That's because he's mad. He's aware that he'd never been in the pages of *Men's Health* before this issue. "So I stopped reading," he says. (*Gulp.*) He's also aware that he's no longer the prototype receiver NFL scouts want. The league's in the midst of a love affair with speedy Smurf wideouts, thanks to Tyreek Hill's dominance in Miami, Amon-Ra St. Brown's ascendance in Detroit, and Xavierorthy's drafting by Kansas City. "The one thing you can't coach," says Metcalf with slight annoyance, "is how to be fast." His mission: remind everyone that you can't coach light-speed freight train, either. All he needs to do is drop PlayStation numbers (and more YouTube-worthy blocks).

"I'm not trying to fit in with nobody's mentality," he says. "I'm gonna be a total football player." To reach those heights, he found more strength this off-season, french fries be damned.

WELL, THIS DOESN'T happen often. Metcalf is struggling. It's mid-March, and Metcalf has just started his off-season program. He's in UCLA's weight room (his typical off-season haunt), his hands grasping a loaded barbell on the floor weighing a grand total of 288 pounds. He's going to attempt to power-clean it six times, a show of explosive strength that will fuel him to run away from more DBs—and that could put an Olympic weightlifter to shame.

Metcalf takes a deep breath, then powerfully stands with the weight, pulling the bar up toward his shoulders. He drops the weight to the floor. He does four reps, then tries a fifth. Except the bar won't budge. "I kinda pissed myself off," he says. "I couldn't hit those last two reps."

Metcalf almost never misses his reps, says his trainer, Trey Shaw. He actually makes a point to do the opposite, sneaking in an extra rep during every set. A year ago, when Metcalf began working with Shaw, he settled under a bench press and ripped through reps. Shaw went to grab the bar after counting them out. Metcalf hissed at him to stop—then did a few more. "I thought I miscounted," Shaw says. "No matter what I ask for, he always does one [more] rep."

Sometimes that means doing a set of heavy barbell lunges for ten reps, then adding an extra. On Fridays, he often runs 100-yard sprints. Shaw will ask him to do six. He'll gut out seven. Whatever he does, he aims to push hard enough that the final rep is a challenge. This taxes his body, he says, while building mental strength. "There's a quote: The body will quit long before the mind will," says Metcalf. "I think it's just pushing myself... always trying to prepare myself for a fourth quarter of a game."

This approach to your training conditions you to know you can always push harder. Metcalf proves this a few weeks later, when he returns to UCLA and those 288-pound cleans. He easily does six clean reps—and that trademark seventh. "I know I've accumulated probably thousands of reps more than probably the normal person who's in the gym doing what's on their workout card," he says later. "Everything to me is mental."

Metcalf learned this habit from his dad, Terrence Metcalf. Terrence, who spent seven years in the NFL playing offensive line, started bringing his son to off-season workouts when DK was seven. When Terrence retired in 2010 and moved the family to Mississippi, he spent even more time training with his son.

Occasionally father and son would head to Ole Miss, the same campus where Terrence had developed into an All-American (and where DK would star), and run sprints. Other times, they'd hit the weights at DK's high school weight room. Wherever they were, Metcalf saw his dad pushing hard. "My pops always told me to just do an extra rep, and I just always kept that with me," he says.

Until he reached the NFL. Partly due to a fractured cervical spine as a junior at Ole Miss, Metcalf slipped into the second round of the 2019 NFL draft, landing with the Seahawks. To avoid injuries, he ditched his one-extra-rep philosophy. He spent his first few years as a pro in athletic-training facilities, and most of these take a kinder, gentler approach to getting pros game ready. Instead of pushing an athlete's limits, pro trainers often make sure they avoid injuries and pain, limiting the balls-to-the-wall sets Metcalf adored. "Not saying anything was wrong with the training-facility approach of taking care of your body," he says, "but I think of pain as probably a good thing."

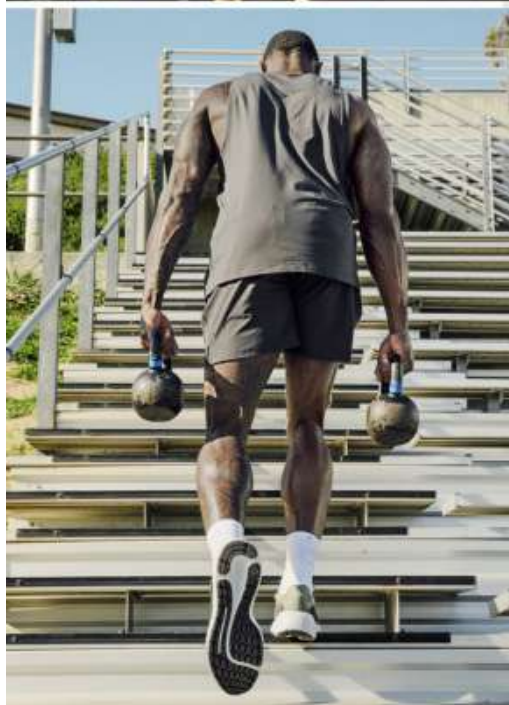
So in the summer of 2022, Metcalf shifted gears, choosing to work out alone. A year later, he hired Shaw, who understood the importance of gym classics like squats and bench presses. "Ultimately," Metcalf says, "I came to the conclusion of 'I'm not gonna do any passive lifts.'"

FIRST HE SHOCKED you with his french-fry habit. Now he's shocking you with his... balance? It's June, and Metcalf's doing his *Men's Health* shoot, making a workout video at the Proactive Sports gym in Los Angeles, a cutting-edge facility filled with everything from Bosu balls to SkiErgs to Keiser machines (fueled by pneumatic resistance) to a pair of giant sticks that athletes "stir" into the floor.

Shaw couldn't make this shoot, so Proactive's Josh Tuerpe is running the workout. He starts by asking Metcalf to balance on one foot on a Bosu, light weights in both hands. Metcalf leans forward and flares his arms, stretching his pecs and challenging his leg stability.

It's an exercise Metcalf has never done, yet he never breaks form. He has zero problems slaying anything Tuerpe asks for. It's a reminder to all gymgoers: If an NFL receiver doesn't need exotic exercises or overpriced workout gear to build strength (and showcase that strength with new moves!), you likely don't, either. "We stick to basic workouts," says Shaw. "He just wants to get in there and work."

Metcalf does legs on Mondays, focusing on squats and lunges. Tuesdays are about bench presses. After a Wednesday off day, Thursdays bring explosive moves (like power cleans), and Fridays center on those sprints and on-field work. Metcalf decided this off-season that he wanted to be faster after the catch, so he'll throw in



BUILD METCALF MUSCLE

THREE
STAPLE EXERCISES
IN DK'S ROUTINES.
DO EACH ONCE A WEEK.

UPSTAIRS FARMER'S CARRY

- Stand in front of a staircase holding heavy dumbbells at your sides. Walk up 10 to 12 steps. Turn around and walk back down. That's 1 set; rest 60 seconds. Do 3 sets, blasting forearms and core and building underrated back muscle, too.

BARBELL REVERSE LUNGE

- Stand with a loaded barbell held across your mid-back, abs and glutes tight. Step back with your right foot, then bend at the knees and hips, lowering into a lunge. Press back to standing. Do 3 sets of 8 to 10 reps per side.

HANGING LEG LIFT

- Yes, Metcalf trains his abs, too! Hang from a pullup bar with an overhand grip, abs and glutes tight. Tuck your knees toward your chest. Lower with control. Do 3 sets of 8 to 10 reps.

extra foot-skill work on other days, too.

Every exercise lets Metcalf prove his strength. His most WTF move reinvents the farmer's walk: Metcalf holds heavy dumbbells, then walks up and down stairs. Because the moves are so simple, says Shaw, Metcalf can focus on moving large loads. "He'll pick up the heaviest dumbbells he can find," the trainer says.

Some trainers will tell you that the constant pushing might eventually wear an athlete down. Metcalf says the opposite: He entered Seattle's 2023 training camp in his best shape, a changeup from his sluggish training-camp starts of the past. "It's basically me attacking the year," he says, "instead of vice versa."

Metcalf can maintain his strength in part because he sneaks in more recovery

time than you might realize, even if these moments don't come with compression boots and saunas. During the off-season, he doesn't train on weekends or Wednesdays. And when the 2023 regular season wrapped up, he took all of February to let mind and body recover.

He looks forward to retirement, when he'll indulge that inner fat-ass. "Not M&M's," he says, thinking ahead. "But gummies and burgers. That's what I look forward to."

For now he needs his strength so he can continue to pummel (and run past/through/around/over) NFL defenders. "I can't focus too much on the future," he says. "I've gotta stay where my feet are and focus on winning games for this season."

THE REINVENTED QUARTERBACK

A 2023 bookended by injuries pushed the Bengals' **JOE BURROW** to reconstruct his entire approach to fitness and nutrition.

By **EBENEZER SAMUEL, C.S.C.S.**

THIS TIME, the call was different. At the end of each of Joe Burrow's first four years with the Bengals, he'd buzz his longtime trainer, Dak Notestine, C.S.C.S., to plan his off-season workouts. But after Cincy was locked out of the playoffs last year for the first time since 2020, Burrow asked Notestine for something more. The QB wanted to completely rebuild how he thought about strength, fitness, and durability.

The 2023 season had started with Burrow fighting through a strained right calf he'd suffered in training camp. And it had ended with a torn ligament in his right wrist in week 11 against the Ravens (who went on to unseat the Bengals as AFC North champs). For the second time in his pro career, Burrow finished the year on injured reserve. He couldn't let it happen again. "The biggest thing for me this year is just being out there with the guys," Burrow says, "and be available."

To that end, the 27-year-old set out on a renewed quest for power, searching for extra pounds of muscle and extra layers of protection wherever he could. He hired a nutritionist and a chef, rebuilt his hydration routine around Bodyarmor drinks, revamped his workouts, and refocused his mind. So while Burrow's always been Joe Cool (and his Eminem-bleached

July hairdo is proof), he rolled into training camp this year with something more than confidence: a well-rounded approach to his health. And he's added a solid ten pounds (up to 217), thanks to these fitness and nutrition tweaks.

HE IDENTIFIED WORKOUT WEAKNESSES

BURROW FELL IN love with strength training a decade ago, when he packed on 30 pounds between his freshman and sophomore years of high school. "Those two years were the biggest changes in my body in my life," he says, "the first time that I noticed myself getting bigger and stronger."

But this off-season wasn't just about size. Notestine says Burrow didn't train like a bodybuilder or a powerlifter. Instead, he concentrated on exercises that

tested his surgically repaired right wrist: bear crawls and farmer's walks holding 45-pound plates. (Try them, if you dare.) To better protect his lower body against injury, Burrow challenged himself with single-leg skater squats, building up until he could do them with 100 pounds. Insulating your body against injury isn't about raw muscle, as Burrow shows. It's about muscle in the right places.

HE DIALED IN HIS DIET

FORGET JUST EATING "clean." Burrow focused his off-season on making sure his calories came from "quality" sources (think lean chicken), says Notestine, and

SQUAT LIKE BURROW

TRAINING TIP

● Learn Burrow's skater squat to build single-leg strength. Start standing. Lift your left leg, knee bent so that your left shin faces the floor. Bend at the right knee and hip, slowly lowering until your left knee touches the floor. Using only your right leg, stand back up. That's 1 rep; do 3 sets of 4 or 5 per side.



making sure he ate often enough to give his body consistent energy. Having a chef for the first time in his career was key. “He makes a fire chicken sandwich that’s awesome,” says Burrow.

He also adjusted his hydration patterns. No, he says, he’s never had problems guzzling water daily. But he realized that hydration means more than that. “This is the first year that I’m more focused on drinking electrolytes and making sure that my body absorbs those nutrients, as opposed to just drinking water,” he says. “So we use those Bodyarmor Flash I.V.s.” He says the results have been “amazing.”

HE TRAINED HIS BRAIN

THE MAGIC OF his training regimen, says Burrow, is that it built mental muscle, too. Take, for example, the isometric Bulgarian split squat, a brutal move but a favorite of his. The exercise tasks him with balancing on one leg, his other foot on a bench behind him, a bar mounted to a rack (so it can’t be driven upward) pinned to his back. From there, he holds for five seconds, continually driving upward with every muscle in his body.

“I think part of [building mental strength] is just doing really hard, really hard shit—that you have to find that place in your mind that you can go and

fight through it,” Burrow says. “If you’re doing really hard stuff that you’re not sure you can push through, when you push through it, then once you’re in that spot again, you know your mind is going to be a lot stronger in that situation.”

That blend of strength building has Burrow ready for 2024. “I have a really good feeling about this year,” he says. “My body’s in a really good spot, better than in years past.” But the “test,” Burrow says, will be the next five months of the year, the heart of the NFL regular season. “Upcoming is the exam,” he adds, “so I’m excited to take it.”

FOCUS IN THE CLUTCH!

Learn Atlanta kicker **YOUNGHOE KOO**'s three-step process for finding his flow.

By **ANNA KATHERINE CLEMMONS**



LONG BEFORE Younghoe Koo was kicking clutch field goals for the Atlanta Falcons, he was a middle school soccer player in Ridgewood, New Jersey. His approach then was simple. "It was just 'see ball, hit ball,'" he says.

Then everything changed. After kicking for the Georgia Southern football team, Koo missed two potentially game-winning kicks as an undrafted rookie for the Los Angeles Chargers in 2017 and was cut. "When the field disappears, what's your go-to?" he says. "That's when I kind of figured out the mental part. It's more preparation, having a process."

When Koo, who's just the fourth Korean-born player in NFL history, returned to the league, he arrived with greater mental strength in the clutch. His ability to erase distractions has fueled his ascent: Now 30, he enters this season with the NFL's fourth-highest field-goal percentage. Use his clutch approach before your next rec-league showdown or PowerPoint presentation.

STEP 1: KNOW YOUR ROLE ALL THOSE MIRROR

rehearsals before a big speech give you a chance to zone in on tiny nuances that can help you on game day. This is what Koo thinks about whenever he's kicking at a high school field or the Falcons' practice facility alone. He'll work to master the pace of his steps or what's going through his head when he begins his approach to the ball. "Are you sticking to the same tempo, the same breath work [every time]?" he says. "If not, be aware of that. Why is it different?"

STEP 2: VISUALIZE BEYOND YOUR EYES

THE NIGHT BEFORE a game, Koo imagines a handful of scenarios (think game winner, long field goal before halftime, awkward field goal from left hash). But he doesn't just want to "see" the moment in his mind. "You've gotta try to smell the paint," he says. "Hear the crowd noise. You've gotta try to mimic all those different things so that you're tricking your brain. I call it stealing reps."

STEP 3: DO YOU

IN THE DAYS before any big moment, you'll receive advice from many channels. Koo's had his kicking form dissected since high school. He'll listen to new ideas, he says, but listens to his own body and mind first. "I've always had a different swing, in my opinion. Some people gave me tips here and there. I tried it out, but it didn't feel right for me, so then I would just go back to what I know." The Falcons are happy with those results.

Jay Bendlin/Atlanta Falcons (Koo), Carter Franklin (Garrett).

UPGRADE YOUR CORE

MYLES GARRETT

relies on next-level ab strength.



THERE ARE bone-crushing sacks that leave QBs eating turf. And then there's what the Cleveland Browns' Myles Garrett did before halftime against the Colts last year, speeding past Indy turnstile (we mean offensive tackle) Blake Freeland, then shoving Gardner Minshew so hard he lost control of the football and rag-dolled to the ground.

For Garrett, a six-foot-four, 272-pound defensive end/force of nature, plays like this aren't about total-body strength or his 585-pound bench press or his viral 58-inch



THE MH STRONG ALL-PRO TEAM



From our three cover badasses to plenty of other speed and muscle, our first-ever MH Strong squad is loaded.

OFFENSE

RB

CHRISTIAN McCAFFREY
49ers, 5'11", 210 lb
NFL's leading rusher deadlifts 500—and does gymnastics.

RB

DERRICK HENRY
Ravens, 6'3", 247 lb
Churns out 3.32 yards after contact, thanks to a 500-pound squat.

TE

GEORGE KITTLE
49ers, 6'4", 250 lb
The 2023 tight end receiving-yards leader deadlifts 555.

QB

JOE BURROW
Bengals, 6'4", 217 lb
Brains (career 98.6 QB rating) and brawn (see skater squat).

OT

PENEISEWELL
Lions, 6'5", 335 lb
One sack allowed in '23. Thirty bench-press reps at 225 lbs.

OT

LAREMY TUNSIL
Texans, 6'5", 313 lb
Four-time Pro Bowler benches 225 34 times.

WR

AMON-RAST BROWN
Lions, 6'0", 202 lb
Benches 365. Also has three 90-plus-catch campaigns.

OT

LANE JOHNSON
Eagles, 6'6", 325 lb
His 705-pound farmer's carry showcases endurance.

C

CREED HUMPHREY
Chiefs, 6'4", 302 lb
Athleticism (33-inch vert) helped him allow just four sacks last year.

OT

TRENT WILLIAMS
49ers, 6'5", 320 lb
Big cosign: CMC says Williams is the strongest player in the league.

WR

DK METCALF
Seahawks, 6'4", 235 lb
Strength fueled back-to-back 1,000-yard campaigns.

DEFENSE

DE

CHASE YOUNG
Saints, 6'5", 264 lb
Had 7.5 sacks in '23. Back strength (he DB-rows 175 pounds) helped.

DT

ANDREW BILLINGS
Bears, 6'1", 311 lb
Immovable object squats 805—and anchored 2023's best rush defense.

DT

DEXTER LAWRENCE
Giants, 6'4", 340 lb
Disruptive (four career forced fumbles), thanks to his 5.05 40 time.

DE

MYLES GARRETT
Browns, 6'4", 272 lb
Only his stats (14 sacks in '23) are bigger than his box jump (58 inches).

CB

SAUCE GARDNER
Jets, 6'3", 190 lb
A 4.41 40 speed helped him make two Pro Bowls.

LB

MICAH PARSONS
Cowboys, 6'3", 245 lb
A 380 lb power clean fueled 14 sacks in 2023.

LB

ROQUAN SMITH
Ravens, 6'1", 230 lb
Tackling machine (158 in '23) also runs a 4.51 40.

LB

T.J. WATT
Steelers, 6'4", 252 lb
Had 19 sacks in '23, thanks to his burst off the line (10'8" broad jump).

CB

JALEN RAMSEY
Dolphins, 6'1", 208 lb
Seven-time Pro Bowler has a 41.5-inch vertical jump.

S

KYLE HAMILTON
Ravens, 6'4", 220 lb
Thank that 132 IQ for last year's four interceptions.

S

KAMREN CURL
Rams, 6'2", 198 lb
Big bench (24 reps at 225) fuels big plays (21 career tackles for loss).

SPECIAL TEAMS

K

YOUNGHOE KOO
Falcons, 5'9", 185 lb
Crazy consistent: Zero field-goal misses inside 40 yards last year.

P

ETHAN EVANS
Rams, 6'3", 231 lb
A 675-pound deadlift fueled his 49.2-yard average punt.

HOW WE CHOSE: Our selection committee built full offensive, defensive, and special-teams starting lineups, searching for players who delivered both on-field production and weight-room strength. **MATT BLANK**, NASM, fitness trainer; **DAVID OTEY**, C.S.C.S., MH advisor; **ELENEZER SAMUEL**, C.S.C.S., MH fitness director; **MELVIN SANDERS**, C.S.C.S., fitness trainer; **BRETT WILLIAMS**, NASM, MH senior fitness editor

box jump. They're about core strength. He understands how to powerfully use his abs and core to deliver extra *oomph* into helpless linemen and QBs. "The way my body is able to react and turn and counter the forces that are being applied to me helps me stay in my rush," Garrett says. That's especially useful, he adds, because most linemen he faces are "pretty lax with their core. . . . They can't fight back while they're mid-run." Add these two moves to your training at least once a week. —ANNA KATHERINE CLEMMONS

MASTER GARRETT'S CRITICAL ROTATIONAL MOVES

KETTLEBELL PLANK DRAG

● Get in pushup position, a kettlebell just outside your right hand. Grab the bell with your left hand; drag it to just outside your left shoulder. Reset in pushup position; repeat on the other side. (Garrett does this with 54-pound bells.) Do 3 sets of 8 to 10.

LANDMINE ROTATION

● Place an end of a barbell on the floor (in a towel), a weight plate on the other. Kneel and hold the weighted end with both hands at your right hip. Press overhead with both hands; lower back to your hip. That's 1 rep; do 3 sets of 10 per side.

**ARE
YOU
THERE,
GOD?**

**BY
MICKEY
RAPKIN**

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CLAY PATRICK
McBRIDE**

iT'S ME,

**J
A
K
E**

**How societal
menace and
serial disrupter
JAKE PAUL is
trying to change
the sport of
boxing, influence
influencer
culture, and, *gulp*,
maybe change
the world, too.**





ON A HOT EARLY-SUMMER AFTERNOON, JAKE PAUL SITS IN HIS BACKYARD, TELLING ME ABOUT THE TIME GOD SPOKE TO HIM.

We're poolside at his \$16 million house on the north side of Puerto Rico, where he lives and trains. And while I'm aware that a chat with God is exactly the kind of story a YouTube provocateur-turned-pro-boxer might invent for clicks, this is not a bit.

On his podcast, *BS w/ Jake Paul*, the 27-year-old comes off as a brash shit-talker (and he is, recently claiming that Conor McGregor tweets at 3:00 A.M. on coke). But Paul is more thoughtful IRL, nervous almost, clutching his left forearm as he speaks. His features are softer, too; he looks like the villain in *The Karate Kid* if you drew him from memory.

"I'm going to explain something that can't be explained with words," he tells me, slowly and deliberately. "And that's really how I describe it to people." He was under the influence of the psychedelic DMT a few years ago. "It's like you go into this space where you fully understand human consciousness and the universe and how everything is interconnected, and that the whole universe is just one being." As he tells it, both times he tried DMT, God laid out the same mission for him. It's a big one. We'll get to God's plan soon. But I had to wonder if our Lord also had a few questions for Paul first.

Paul's reputation precedes him. As high school kids in Westlake, Ohio, he and his older brother, Logan, made their names on the short-form-video site Vine, where their *Jackass*-style bro comedy attracted millions of followers (and brands chasing that clout) in 2013. Their fame outlived the app, so they migrated to YouTube. In 2016, Disney hired Paul to play (what else?) a YouTuber on a show called *Bizaardvark*. Midway through

season 2, they split: Paul's brand of hijinks (setting fire to furniture in an empty pool) was off-brand for the Mouse.

An army of disaffected youth 15 million strong reared on Internet memes have since followed him everywhere. They called themselves Jake Paulers. If he was a moron, he was *their* moron, a give-no-fucks brat thumbing his nose at authority. He leaned into his nickname, selling Problem Child merch. But to anyone over 18, he was the embodiment of Gen Z entitlement. Deadspin called him "the worst person on Earth."

His stunts grew more outlandish. (How else to feed the beast?) In 2021, Justine Paradise, a 24-year-old TikTok influencer, accused Paul of sexual assault—a claim he denied. (No charges were ever filed.) Still, the Jake Paulers continued to delight in the chaos, even more so as their hero started boxing, a dare that became a revenue stream and then something even more unlikely: a career. After 12 bouts, he'll fight Mike Tyson live on Netflix for \$30 million in November.

■ Jake Paul, 27, and Mike Tyson, 58, face off. Their fight on Netflix is scheduled for November 15.

When USA Boxing announced it was enlisting Paul as a partner for the Paris Olympics, the purists revolted. "We had some old-school boxing people that said, 'You're going to kill the sport,'" says Mike McAtee, the CEO of USA Boxing. Forget that the sport had been in a ratings free fall. There had to be some way to attract eyeballs other than the Problem Child, right?

That brings us to God's plan. "I believe God is ushering me to change the world in many ways, inspiring so many people—in so many different ways—to go chase their dreams. I'm the living, breathing, most relatable version of that." Here he invokes Anthony Edwards, the Minnesota Timberwolves player, saying, "You can jump 48 inches in the air? That's not relatable. What's relatable is the kid who was a Disney Channel actor and decided to start boxing, then seven years later is going to become a world champion."

In 2024's America, perhaps we get the hero we deserve: a yoked he-man with a checkered past, a koi pond, and his own line of body spray (W, as in winning, on sale exclusively at Walmart!). What makes a generation of young men want to smell like this guy? What made Netflix, USA Boxing, and Silicon Valley kingmaker Marc Andreessen want to jump in bed with him? Seven years ago, Jake Paul hadn't thrown a punch (though surely he'd made a donkey-punch joke or two). Today, he's the face of a sport that dates back to the ancient Greeks. The Lord may work in mysterious ways, but nobody, not even Jake Paul himself, saw this coming.

THE BACKDROP IN DORADO, Puerto Rico, is A+. Drive past the guardhouse, past the palm trees and the tropical lawns, and you'll eventually come to Paul's glass box, an eight-bedroom home he refers to as the



“Taj MaPaul.” He’s funny like that. And he knows that a joke gets funnier when you take it to an absurd extreme. In the bathroom, hand towels are adorned with a Taj MaPaul logo, as are china plates in a cabinet. Fraternal-twin yellow Ferraris are parked in the garage. The house, it must be said, is so clean you could lick a protein shake off the floor.

It’s after 3:00 P.M. when we sit down to breakfast. Paul is shirtless in red trunks, his long, tan torso a tattooed canvas. He’s still waking up, he tells me, wiping sleep from his eyes as his chef delivers a plate of organic granola, fresh berries, and kefir. Late night? Not exactly, at least not in the way you’re thinking.

“The fights are at night,” Paul says. “So we train to be awake at night. My schedule’s always really fucked up. If I’m training twice a day—especially sparring—adrenaline’s in your system and going to sleep at night is very difficult.”

The plan is to eat and then head down to the private beach to meditate. While an afternoon meditation session feels like something a publicist would orchestrate to soften a Cro-Magnon’s image, it’s what Paul would be doing today anyway. He’s been working with a meditation coach for the past four years, he says as we climb into a golf cart to drive toward the water. “There’s so many things that pull us away from our nature. Meditation can just bring you back to that true, animalistic self.”

He parks his golf cart at the beach and leaves his phone on the dashboard, saying, “I hate my phone.” I laugh, because the phone is what made him famous. “Yeah,” he says, “it’s kind of backward. I love what I do, but sometimes it’s just like, I would rather just box and live life without a phone, to be honest.” The phone, he says, is “just stress and cortisol.”

The fact that he hates the thing that pulled him out of a “random town” in Ohio is a lot to take in. If his life were a movie—and a loose adaptation is already in the works—it might open in his childhood home, amid his parents’ divorce. They would split custody of their kids. Gregory, a real estate agent and commercial roofer, struggles to pay the bills. He also hits his boys, a memory that still stings. Pam is a nurse. A note from her hangs in Paul’s locker in Puerto Rico years later. It reads: “You are built different Jake! I AM SO PROUD of you my eyes water!”

Jake and Logan start posting videos to

Vine in 2013, and their humor is a time capsule of the social mores that year. In one clip, Jake quotes *Scarface* (“Say hello to my little friend!”), only to reveal he’s holding a little person like a tommy gun. In another, Jake climbs into a shopping cart in a store and hoists a sword, shouting, “For Narnia!” He and his brother are amusing and cute and often shirtless. The videos are far more lucrative than anyone could have imagined, and soon they sign deals with Ubisoft and Pepsi.

At 17, Paul moves to Los Angeles. Three years later, he settles in Calabasas and buys a \$6.9 million manse, inviting other content creators to live with him in a “collab house.” But sometimes his content creation goes too far, such as when he electroshocks people without warning. One reporter accuses Paul of creating a circus, to which he replies: “People like going to circuses, right?” But it’s not all clowning. He has 15 people plus a creative director on the payroll helping him build a millennial social-media empire that has more than 20 million subscribers and generates \$3 million per month.

Paul is the first to admit that things went a little sideways, but honestly, what did people think was going to happen when a high school dropout bought a 15,000-square-foot home before his frontal lobe was fully formed? “Your dopamine receptors get screwed up. You have to realize that,” he says. “Otherwise you’ll fall into depression when you stop buying things or stop accomplishing new things.”

I’m not out to make excuses for Paul, but every so-called villain has an origin story, too, and in his he starts out an underdog. “I was the laughingstock of my high school,” he says, “including the teachers. My principal was hating on me, actually talking shit about me to my face. And it broke my heart.” Later, he says, “when I started to gain viewership and money—first of all, I wanted to make my dad proud, mostly because I saw him lose everything in the divorce—I thought to

“There’s so many things that pull us away from our nature. Meditation can just bring you back to that true, animalistic self.”



■ Twenty-year-old Jake Paul at the Radio Disney Music Awards in 2017.

myself, *I’d never want to be in that position, [for] my kids to see me weak. I wanted to be successful so fucking bad that when I started to get the success, I just poured gas on the fire. I guess pun intended.”*

He started boxing on a lark. It was 2018 and two British YouTubers, KSI and Deji (also brothers), challenged the Paul boys to a fight. Logan lost; Jake won. More than 800,000 people tuned in live on YouTube. The sales pitch was almost too easy: What would you pay to watch someone punch one of the most hated men in America in the face? When asked about Jake’s entertainment value, McAttee butchers a quote from the Greatest: “Muhammad Ali said it best. *You can love me, you can hate me, I don’t care. Buy a ticket.*”

IF YOU’RE A MAN OF FAITH, you might begin to see the Almighty’s fingerprints on this man’s life. Yeah, it’s 2024 and there’s a need for everything to mean something. But if you squint, Paul really is an avatar of millennial males’ mispent youth, the frontman for the first generation to go through puberty with a like button. Scientists are still trying to figure out how to measure the damage (or where to send the bill). But Paul the apostle is preaching hope that toxic masculinity has a short half-life.

Paul doesn’t use these words, but spend a few hours with him and it’s clear he sees himself as a prism through which we can understand the evolution of a specific (if very large) cohort of young men. “The world moved into a place of understanding cancel culture more and how a lot of it’s bullshit,” he says. “There are bad people who do bad things. But there are also people who just genuinely make mistakes. People definitely see my growth as a young man still learning and figuring

myself out. And boxing is bringing my head to a really good place.”

Boxing came to him at exactly the right time. (Divine intervention, perhaps.) In 2018, several months before fighting KSI and Deji, YouTube demonetized the Paul brothers after a disturbing incident in a Japanese “suicide forest,” where Logan showed a dead body. Jake’s career was collateral damage. His big brother’s implosion forced Paul to turn inward at the ripe old age of 21. “I realized, Who am I? Why was I filming these videos? I don’t like the past three years of my life. I’m lost. I don’t want to do that anymore. But what do I do? Is it boxing? I don’t fucking know.”

Call it a sideshow. But when Paul made his pro-boxing debut in January 2020, knocking out another YouTuber, AnEsonGib, the fight trended on Twitter, garnering far more attention than the evening’s main event. Paul made several million dollars that night.

Without a clear path, he started to train, a journey he documented online. He felt calmer, stronger. He’d caught the bug. But the public (and the sport) remained unconvinced. Later in 2020, when Paul announced he was fighting the former NBA star Nate Robinson, boxing promoter Lou DiBella was disgusted, saying, “The idea that I gotta watch Jake Paul or some of these other numbnuts fighting ex-pro football players—who the fuck wants to see that?”

A lot of people, apparently. The Robinson fight sold 1.6 million tickets. Still, the rap on Paul’s boxing career—which currently

stands at 10–1—was that he only fought curiosities. You know, washed-up UFC stars, former NBA players, and (come November, against Tyson) old people. When he fought an actual boxer, Tommy Fury, in 2023, he lost.

Paul’s team will remind you that he lost that fight in a split decision. But what’s more revealing is that after the fight—which he called the biggest L of his life—he fired his coach and doubled down on the sport. This year, he knocked out former Golden Glove winner Ryan Bourland and bare-knuckle king Mike Perry. He’s kept at it. Because there was a time when Paul could have had anything (and anyone) he wanted, yet all he felt was numb. There was something honest about boxing. When you enter the ring with a fighter, even 27 million Instagram followers can’t save you.

EARLY ON, PAUL LEANED INTO playing the cartoon villain, but now he’s revealing he wasn’t drawn in 2D. Like other provocateurs who speak to extremely online young men—think Theo Von or Andrew Tate—Paul is prone to spouting what’s in his feed, and often that’s pseudoscience. In a recent episode of his podcast, he riffed on whether Big Pharma wants Americans to get diabetes to boost profits. He also said he had heard drinking from plastic water bottles for a week is equivalent to ingesting a plastic credit card. He is, unsurprisingly, a Trump supporter. I ask if he feels he has a duty to get it right, considering he’s speaking

to 27 million followers. “Yeah,” he mutters. “I guess. I believe that if I know or feel what’s best, then I feel like I have a responsibility to voice my opinion.”

But unlike Tate or Von or even Joe Rogan, Paul seems to crave mainstream acceptance. He doesn’t want to burn boxing to the ground; he wants to remake it from the inside. In 2021, Paul launched Most Valuable Promotions with Nakisa Bidarian, a former UFC executive. One of their first signings was Amanda Serrano, a star in women’s boxing who was somehow making “\$5,000 a fight,” Paul says. “She’s this vicious, exciting fighter” who had won championships in seven different weight classes. “The only other person to do that is Manny Pacquiao.” With Paul promoting her, Serrano became the first female fighter to earn a \$1 million purse.

In late 2023, even USA Boxing couldn’t ignore Paul anymore. In fact, by naming him a partner for the Olympics, it brought him into the fold. Paul flew to Colorado to tutor athletes in the dark arts of social media. Perhaps God (and USA Boxing) recognized the same quality in him: His great gift isn’t in the ring but in his ability to communicate with his flock, because he is one of them.

I laughed when I heard he was launching a deodorant line—sorry, a *grooming* line. But it’s shrewd. He eschewed an alcohol deal because “every fucking celebrity has an alcohol. You can’t differentiate it.” But the fans who once devoured Paul’s idiotic short-form content had become millennials concerned about hormones and microplastics. W’s packaging doesn’t say Jake Paul on it. But it shouts, “No weird stuff.” He can talk your ear off about parabens.

“I’m just playing in areas where I know I can generate interest,” says Paul, proclaiming that every W product will cost less than \$10. W is already valued at more than \$150 million and has investors like Fanatics CEO Michael Rubin and tennis star Naomi Osaka. Paul is also diversifying. He and investor Geoffrey Woo launched a venture-capital fund called Anti Fund in 2021, which incubated W and backed an AI-powered military defense company, Anduril. Andreessen, the uber venture capitalist, was one of Anti Fund’s first backers. Meanwhile, Paul’s sports-gambling app, Betr, launched in 2022 and has a \$375 million valuation.

His success outside the ring makes his decision to step into it for the fight against

■ Paul lost his cruiser-weight fight with Tommy Fury by split decision on February 26, 2023.



This page: François Neill/Getty Images. Opposite: Clay Patrick McBride/Sports Illustrated.



Tyson at the AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas, seem risky. The age gap between Paul and Tyson is 31 years—the biggest in the history of pro boxing. Still, oddsmakers are split on who will win. “Power’s the last to go,” says McAtee, invoking the belief that Tyson has a puncher’s chance. The stakes are real, insists Bidarian, who says bluntly, “If Jake loses to Mike Tyson—if he couldn’t beat a 58-year-old—he’s written off within professional boxing.”

Anticipating Tyson’s uppercut, Paul has been working on fighting in the pocket, reminding me, “It’s Mike Tyson.” But it’s not about this one fight. It’s part of his quest to claim the cruiserweight title. “I’m slowly improving with each camp,” he says.

Zooming out, winning may be better measured through a different lens. “We believe it’s going to be the most streamed sporting event in U.S. history,” says Bidarian. He suggests that Paul change his nickname to the American Dream.

PAUL COMES DOWN TO THE beach twice a week to meditate, he tells me. We sit on the sand, cross-legged, in silence. The waves lap against the shore, the sun stupid hot, but he remains still, inhaling

deeply, then breathing out. Before every fight, he repeats the same mantra to himself: “I, Jake Paul, will knock out, defeat, and embarrass—and then I put my opponent’s name.” He will do the same for the Tyson fight. When I steal a glance at him, he is poking himself in the forehead, an attempt to open his third eye.

Thoughts come and go as Paul meditates. Today, his inner voice advises him to focus on rest. “I’ve been going so hard,” he says, “especially this week with the W launch. It was like, *Yo, you need to chill and—after we’re done with this—just lay in bed and go to sleep.*” I point out he would have more free time if he didn’t have so many business interests.

“I know,” he says. “This is what my girlfriend says to me.” He continues: “I like going to Walmart and seeing W in person and making funny videos. I don’t like having to fucking micromanage employees.”

Paul’s girlfriend is the Dutch speed skater Jutta Leerdam, a towering blonde who won a silver medal at 2022’s Beijing Olympics. The two met on Instagram (duh) and appear to be in love. “We have this childlike way of loving each other,” Paul says. “We also both have the discipline and the old-school values. We just fully understand each other as athletes.”

Speaking of relationships, Paul and his father are in a good place, he tells me. “I think he just had to understand his wrongs and acknowledge them. And I don’t hold it against him or anything. Like, Yeah, I did that. Yeah, I fucked up.” *You mean acknowledging that he hit you?* I ask. “Yeah, exactly. Just, the whole divorce and everything around it was nasty. And him acknowledging that.”

With that, we come back to where we started: God’s purpose for Jake Paul and the sweet science. Of the sport of boxing, Paul says, “I think as animals, we need to express ourselves through different forms of violence—in a healthy way, obviously. Boxing gives people that. It’s an art form. It’s an expression of myself. I’m letting this creativity and these punches flow through me.” He adds, “Hopefully this generation can find the same love for boxing that I did. I had to fix me before I could fix the world. And that took time.”

“My life-coach-slash-therapist has been saying this for years. ‘You’re not the Problem Child at all. You’re actually the Solution Child.’” ■

MICKEY RAPKIN is a journalist and screenwriter whose first book, *Pitch Perfect*, inspired the film series.

TREN NATION

HOW AN OBSCURE **BOVINE STEROID**
BECAME **GYM GEN Z'S** FAVORITE SOCIAL-MEDIA
MUSCLE FLEX.

BY **MATT MARTELL**

ILLUSTRATION BY **EDDIE GUY**



// THE TEXT MESSAGES fly back and forth almost daily. Frank, a teenager in Massachusetts, will see a TikTok post from somebody like @vici.togi. Togi's post starts with him discussing how he took "a little" of an anabolic steroid called trenbolone, then cuts to him injecting himself just above his hip, followed by clips of his muscle-building progress.

Frank will immediately send it to his gym buddy, Jesse. Then one of them will make the joke, says Frank, about "taking tren and turning into an animal and just lifting as much as I could and getting really big because of the tren." When the two high schoolers hit the gym, it's more of the same. Often, when either gym bro fails to set a bench-press personal best, Jesse calls out the fix: "Fuck it, time to hop on tren."

Not anabolic steroids. Not testosterone. Not creatine or multivitamins or a high-protein diet. No, Frank and Jesse (who both spoke on condition of anonymity because trenbolone is deemed illegal) immediately jump to trenbolone, which has quickly developed a rep for increasing muscularity and decreasing body fat all at once. Among bodybuilders it's known as the "god of all steroids" for its potency. To teens and young men, it's simply tren, a ticket to the prototypical social-media-friendly physique. Why? Frank, who's now 18, explains tren's growing popularity with all the confidence and expertise of someone who Googled tren once (mostly to see how jacked it made cows), watched hundreds of hours of tren content on TikTok, and made a ton of tren jokes. "If the only thing you care about is putting on muscle," he says, "it really does seem like tren is the thing to take."

Need proof? Head to TikTok, where there's a "30 day tren challenge," which, as @FinnOnTren explains, requires you to "take tren for 30 days and see how much progress you can actually make." Over on Instagram, @bodybuildingbs promises to teach you how to use "your cutting PEDs correctly" if you "comment 'Tren.'" On YouTube, Chris Raynor, M.D.'s video titled "What the Hell is TREN? And Why Is Everyone Taking It" has more than 1.2 million views and more than 2,500 comments.

Meanwhile, a host of fitfluencers (um, "trenfluencers"?) have a symbiotic relationship with the drug, letting its name enhance their street cred as their conversations normalize its use for the social-media masses. Bodybuilder Nyle Nayga hosts the *Trensparent* podcast; influencer Jon Skywalker sells shirts and sweatpants with TREN SETTER emblazoned on them. So trendy is it to talk about tren that several herbal products (Tren-Max, anyone?), easily sourced online, tout tren-like effects.

Then there are the Tren Twins, Mike and Chris Gaiera, who've become perhaps the biggest walking YouTube billboards for the drug that's part of their identities. The Tren Twins, who use a *Dragon Ball Z* image as their YouTube logo, are stereotypical musclehead influencers, with stocky frames and ostrich-egg biceps. (And yes, they have admitted to using steroids in several of their videos.) They adopted their moniker after being accused of being "fake natty" (aka on steroids) when they broke into fitfluencing two years ago, figuring they'd lean into the accusations by tying themselves to the trendiest steroid around. The branding is working: The Gaieras now have 1.31 million YouTube subscribers. Frank and Jesse are fans. "I'm not even sure if they take tren. It's just other steroids," says Frank. "But that's their social-media name, so that gains a lot of attention, and as a teenager you're seeing these super-jacked dudes, they're showing off their manliness and their masculinity, and you want to achieve that."

That's especially true because of how social media can warp body expectations for young men in Generation Z. "People don't recognize how common body-image issues and pressures are for boys, but nearly a third of teenage boys are trying to gain weight now," says Jason Nagata, M.D., an

associate professor of pediatrics at the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine, who researches steroids, image-enhancing drugs, and eating disorders in adolescent boys and young men. Those teens and young men can't help considering steroids, because despite their side effects, they work. "The reality is that anabolic steroids and trenbolone are very effective in developing muscle mass."

But there's a dark side to all of this: Those who take tren stress that it's not a beginner PED. "No one," said one Reddit poster in the r/steroids forum, which has 249,000 members, "should be really doing tren unless you are massive and in a [bodybuilding] contest prep." That's because it may be the most neurotoxic of all anabolic steroids, according to a recent paper cowritten by Timothy M. Piatkowski, Ph.D., a researcher and lecturer at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia. That neurotoxicity can have especially disastrous effects on teenagers and young men, because their brains are still developing.

Oliver, 26, a 225-pound mountain of a man with dark-brown hair and a well-groomed beard, knows this well. He began taking tren seven years ago and got so jacked that he compared it to "using Photoshop in real life." But using tren put a strain on his relationships and eventually landed him in trouble with the law. His story, which you'll learn more about later, provides a glimpse into the actual dangers of tren.

Mike Israetel, Ph.D., a sports scientist, fitfluencer, and competitive bodybuilder, understands how the drug ruined Oliver's life. "Tren is fucking toxic garbage," says Israetel. "What you're emphasizing with tren is extreme sexuality, extreme dominance-hierarchy awareness, extreme violent thoughts and behaviors. . . . If they could just see the whole truth, most

teens would be like, ‘Dude, fuck that.’”

To be clear: Most tren-obsessed teens (like Frank and Jesse) and many fitfluencers don’t *actually* take it. Neither do the Tren Twins (or so they say). They just watch (or make) the TrenToks, gradually growing tren into a modern muscle myth and social-media flex even though they know it’s way too dangerous to use. But not all boys are holding back. Not even close.

// THE TREND

and the hype are new. Trenbolone is not. It was first synthesized way back in 1963 and approved for use in livestock in the 1980s to promote weight gain in cattle. Around the same time, bodybuilders realized that its tissue-building properties would grow human muscles, too. Tren possesses three times the androgen-binding effect of testosterone (which is also often used as a performance enhancer), so it more effectively attaches itself to your androgen receptors. This allows you to pack on increased muscle mass and strength. It also helps you preserve muscle tissue by inhibiting catabolic (muscle-wasting) hormones like cortisol.

The Great Tren Beef-Up wouldn’t last long—at least out in the open. The Anabolic Steroid Control Act of 1990 added 25 compounds, including trenbolone, as “anabolic steroids” under Schedule III of the Controlled Substances Act, making their distribution a felony and first-time possession for personal use a misdemeanor in the U. S. (Several states also created stricter regulations.) Teen-

agers were part of the motivation for the regulations, says Rick Collins, a defense lawyer and legal expert in the area of performance-enhancing drugs. “The intent of the law was to stop cheating in sports, diminish the black market, and protect the public, especially young people, from using these substances outside of medical supervision,” he says.

The law didn’t work. The black market “boomed,” says Collins, with PEDs flourishing in gym locker rooms. Then, in the early 2000s, the Internet became a haven for steroid distribution. Tren, though, stayed reserved for only the most hardcore muscleheads, and in a way this kept it from youngsters. You were most likely to score some tren if you were a regular gymgoer who knew a more hardcore regular gymgoer.

Social media and influencer culture changed all that, eliminating the gym as a barrier to entry for tren (and other PEDs). And the pressure for teens and young men to look jacked drives them toward PEDs more quickly, says Dr. Nagata. “Social media put steroids on steroids, because social media dramatically escalated the culture that values the effects of image-enhancing drugs like steroids,” Collins says. “Social-media platforms invite a culture of comparison. Whose life is better? Whose car is better? And for many, whose body is better?”

Part of tren’s mystique lies in how effectively it helps users win those comparisons. But its greater potency and binding effectiveness come with a higher risk of side effects than other

steroids have (see “Tren’s True Toxicity” on page 83), including insomnia, high blood pressure, and a cough that can make speaking or breathing difficult. The cough is so well-known in steroid culture it’s called the “tren cough.” Even worse are tren’s mental effects: Bodybuilders associate it with “increased anxiety, paranoia and aggression,” and the drug may “exacerbate existing issues such as anxiety, obsessive compulsive tendencies and body image issues,” according to a 2023 study in *Research in the Sociology of Sport*.

Surviving those side effects almost always gets you the body you want. That same study suggested that tren could “facilitate muscular gains despite flaws in training or diet.” It’s known for building hard, dense, “dry” muscles, essentially helping users develop the thick, striated muscles you see on horses and livestock. “The hallmarks of the tren body are increased muscularity, reduction of body fat, a couple of veins here and there,” says YouTuber Vigorous Steve, who is vocal about his steroid use and delivers fitness and steroid advice. (He has taken tren before, he says, but is not doing so now.)

This hype combines with social-media pressures and puberty to push teenagers toward the drug, says Dr. Nagata. “Social media can exacerbate body comparisons and lead to muscle dissatisfaction and the increased use of tren or other anabolic steroids in boys.”

That’s especially true in an era when social media increasingly normalizes PED use among bodybuilders and gym rats alike, especially testosterone

replacement therapy. And sure, TRT is different from supplemental testosterone use for muscle building, but it’s becoming increasingly easy to view all PEDs as a unified spectrum, with some options that are quasi-legal and well studied and others that are . . . not. Bodybuilders no longer hide their testosterone use, either.

Bodybuilder Jeremy Buendia (3.7 million Instagram followers) routinely posts about his hormone replacement therapy, spotlighting his partnership with Transcend, a telehealth company specializing in athletic performance. Ultra-strong powerlifter and bodybuilder Larry Wheels (5.3 million IG followers) announced in 2022 that he was quitting steroids for TRT and has posted about

Influencers Mike (left) and Chris Gaiera say they’ve never taken trenbolone. But they dubbed themselves the Tren Twins and have grown their YouTube audience to 1.31 million subscribers.



how steroids changed his body.

For about two decades, the stigma of steroids kept tren in the shadows, and that lack of exposure protected teens from its temptation. But the social-media exposure has started to normalize steroid use in fitness circles, making tren more acceptable, says Todd, a 39-year-old who has taken it on and off for nearly 20 years and spoke on condition of anonymity. “People around where I live, younger kids are doing it,” he says. “They’re seeing so many of their heroes on social media doing it. They see that they’re fine, they’re using it, nothing’s happening to them. And they probably feel like it’s okay to do it.”

// WHOEVER WANTS

trenbolone now has few problems acquiring it. As the Internet has facilitated the popularity of tren, it’s also transformed its trade, according to Timothy Mackey, Ph.D., an adjunct professor at the University of California, San Diego who studies the drug trade and social media.

The process is frighteningly uncomplicated. Anyone who is looking for the drug simply has to poke around X or Instagram through the right influencer. The user is then rerouted to a messaging platform such as Telegram or WhatsApp. There a seller connects directly with the user to exchange contact information, iron out the details of the transaction, and finalize things on Venmo or PayPal.

“What sellers are doing is they’re leveraging all the benefits of all these different platforms to create an ecosystem,” Mackey says. “One place to maximize the marketing, one place to maximize the consumer interaction, one place to do the transactions. We see it as a whole Internet-ecosystem problem.”

The tren trade extends beyond basic channels, and it includes “tren” impostors sold to capitalize on the hype around the real thing. Earlier this year, Mackey demonstrated how one could find tren purportedly offered for sale on the online music-community platform SoundCloud.

He typed “trenbolone buy” into the search bar and several playlists appeared. Among those playlists was one 13-second clip titled “Where to Get Tren – Where to Buy Trenbolone

Online.” The corresponding image was a shirtless muscular man, along with text about tren. After the user selected the playlist, the next page revealed a description that included an official-looking link, naspcenter.org/Get-Trenbolone.

Click on that link and you are redirected to a company called Crazy Bulk, which sells steroid alternatives that it claims are safe and legal, including Trenorol (also known as Tren-Max), an herbal alternative to trenbolone. Trenorol is also sold on several online marketplaces, including Amazon and eBay. “A lot of times in this market, you’re gonna see places that are claiming to be research labs or chemical providers, but you wouldn’t see a legitimate provider selling on SoundCloud,” Mackey says.

Teens who might want to experiment with tren also feel increasingly empowered by message boards that detail how others have used it. In one early-2024 Reddit thread that had 225 comments, users candidly broke down tren’s good and bad points. They talked of amped appetites (“I turn into a black hole, I could eat for DAYS,” wrote BaetrixReloaded), sex drives (“Horniness skyrocketed to a problematic level,” according to non-squitr), and mood swings.

They also openly discussed exactly how much you need in order to get jacked, with some advising 100mg a day. Others cautioned about side effects when taking more than 200mg a week. The variance in dosing patterns serves as a reminder that tren was originally approved in the U.S. for use in... cows. “There is no human dosing recommendation for tren,” says Israetel, the sports scientist and bodybuilder, “as it has no formal therapeutic use.”

That makes it especially dangerous for teens and first-time users taking large

doses. Those come with a “very high risk of psychosis and rage,” says Israetel. Research has long backed the notion that anabolic-steroid use can adversely affect mental health.

The easy-to-access channels for tren (and other steroids) are tough to eliminate. Libby Baney, senior advisor for the Alliance for Safe Online Pharmacies, suggests legislation that would regulate what websites promote and sell. But even Baney admits that such legislation and enforcement require a variety of financial and technological resources—to monitor the platforms—as well as manpower.

Israetel has a simpler strategy to keep teens from using tren: Talk about it with them honestly. Acknowledge tren’s appeal and explain its consequences. Despite tren’s potential side effects, says Israetel, just blasting it isn’t the best way to dissuade teens from considering it. “If you give young men that balanced perspective and say real things to them,” he says, “that’s probably the best realistic way to go about it.”

// THE ULTIMATE

cautionary tale just may be Oliver, who asked to be identified only by his first name. He started taking tren in 2017. For as much as he raves about his results when on tren, he’s also experienced its darker effects. “[Tren] is not some kind of magic,” he says. “I wish I would have known that, and I also wish I would’ve known it would affect my behavior by taking risks, because it actually caused some problems for my life.”

He started lifting weights at 15, and two years later he jumped on a cycle of testosterone propionate, dosing 100mg every other day. He gained 20 pounds and got “freakishly strong,” he says, but then he wanted more. One year after that—and several years before tren reached social-media-challenge status—a gym bro asked him if he wanted to try



On his *Trensparent* podcast, Nyle Nayga interviews bodybuilders about steroids as well as wellness, mental health, and “the joocy stuff most aren’t willing to talk about.”

TREN'S TRUE TOXICITY

something stronger. "If your friends are doing it, it can't be that dangerous, right?" Oliver says. "That's how we think." At 18, he started doing 50mg of tren a day.

His parents noticed his behavioral changes, but he doesn't think they were ever aware of his tren use. Oliver compares their understanding of what was happening to seeing "a person on the street overdosing. You clearly can see that they aren't well, but you don't know quite why." He did experience the symptoms, though, sweating through his shirts while eating carbs. And the "trensomnia" was brutal; he would toss and turn for hours and spent many nights barely sleeping.

Even worse, Oliver's personality shifted. His aggressiveness, anger, and selfishness made him so unbearable to be around that his mom often didn't want him in the house. Oliver alternated between six-week cycles of tren and rounds of testosterone replacement for five years. During those tren cycles, he says, he partied harder and more often. And if he had a girlfriend, he would be tempted to cheat on her because "it makes you [want to] seek out other partners." Between cycles, he'd notice all these changes in his behavior, but each time he hopped back on he'd tell himself that he had learned to control it.

All of this echoes the *Research in the Sociology of Sport* study, which quoted one tren user as saying, "If you're going to use [trenbolone], make sure you've got all your ducks in a row, financially, relationship wise, everything is like spot on, like nothing is like in the middle of being fucked up, because if you throw tren in when you are like in the middle of a financial hardship or your relationship is iffy, the tren is going to make it much worse."

That's exactly what happened to Oliver. Less than two years after he started using tren, his behavior drove his girlfriend to break up with him. That wasn't his first relationship that ended on a tren cycle, he says, and it wouldn't be the last. According to Oliver, most of his breakups happened during tren cycles. But when this ex began dating a new guy, Oliver says he felt jealous. He blamed a lack of money for his misery and started dealing cocaine. "The high-risk behavior made me think, *I have to get to the top of this world, and that's cocaine*," he says.

In 2018, Oliver was arrested for dealing cocaine. After receiving a light sentence,

he says, he realized he needed to make some changes. Sort of. "I started to clean up my act in other areas," he says, "but I would still use trenbolone." That's illustrative of the potentially psychologically addictive properties the drug has, Israetel says, which are especially problematic for anyone who starts at a young age. "If you grow up on tren, so to speak," he says, "there is some kind of concern that you just might be more tren-like as an adult than you would have otherwise been." The brain, Israetel says, responds to behavioral and thought patterns as it develops, and over time those patterns grow stronger if they're reinforced. Dr. Nagata echoes that: "When individuals with muscle concerns stop using tren, they may become anxious about their muscularity and subsequently resume tren use. This can lead to tren dependence."

This has been Oliver's experience. For as much as he says he's increasingly concerned with tren's negative consequences, he also just completed a tren cycle last summer. He continues to take

other steroids, too, or he does TRT, since his body has stopped producing testosterone on its own. He claims he'll never use tren again—unless he can compete in a bodybuilding show. "I actually have this thought that if I could do well, maybe get the gold, then I wouldn't have anything more to prove."

Oliver's story, of course, doesn't show up on any TikTok or Instagram feed, but it may be a game changer in the parental battles to keep kids off tren. When Frank and Jesse make their jokes, they view the drug as only a mythic muscle maker. But as more information about its side effects emerges, the teens are starting to view trenbolone as something else: a dangerous drug. "I've heard about the effects physically, but the mental ones are far more scary to me," says Jesse. "I never really thought about how steroids are as addictive as recreational drugs."

You won't hear that on Steroid TikTok. ■

MATT MARTELL is the associate editor at *FanGraphs* and a former baseball editor at *Sports Illustrated*. His work has also appeared in *The New York Times*, and he writes about movies on *Substack*.

NOT SURE HOW TO TELL whether someone close to you is just making big gym gains or whether they might be getting a boost from trenbolone? For all the hype around this era's steroid du jour, it has some very real (and very noticeable) side effects. Watch for these.

TREN COUGH

► This well-known side effect is a cough so bad that users may struggle to breathe or speak. It usually occurs shortly after a tren injection, likely because part of it was accidentally introduced into the circulatory system, making its way into your lungs.

ZIT ATTACK

► You'll wind up with pimples—but not just an ordinary breakout. "Purple, giant, puffy pimples all over your face," says Israetel. "All over your back. I had a friend who started tren; he got pimples so bad on his back that legitimately every square inch had like a dozen pimples on it."

OVER-THE-TOP ANXIETY

► Think of whatever makes you most anxious, whether that's public speaking or serious traffic. Be prepared to experience that long-term, says Israetel. "That feeling—permanently—for as long as you use tren," he says. "Weeks. And just when you think it's okay... you get a mini panic attack."

OTHER SIDE EFFECTS TO WATCH FOR

► Extreme sweating; insomnia; liver and kidney trouble; high blood pressure and cardiovascular problems; increased libido, aggression, and emotional dysregulation; decreased natural testosterone production.

The Wide and Wild World of PERFORMANCE ENHANCERS

They all claim to help you **BUILD MUSCLE** and **STOKE STRENGTH**.
But some of them come at a cost.

BY TREVOR THIEME, C.S.C.S.

THE EXTREME STUFF

▶ ANABOLIC STEROIDS

WHEN ARNOLD ruled the Mr. Olympia stage in the 1970s, steroid use was basic and legal. “You took one or two doses at a time, and the total amount most guys used per week was significantly less than it is today,” says Mike Israetel, Ph.D., a competitive bodybuilder and cofounder of RP Strength. “Today, bodybuilders often stack several different steroids, layering and overlapping them in cycles that focus on competitions and stretch as long as a year.” Anabolic steroids function similarly to testosterone: They bind to your androgen receptors to help regulate libido, sperm production, bone building, and muscle growth. The federal government designates anabolic steroids as Schedule III substances and has approved only a small number for human use. (Doctors may prescribe some steroids to treat low T.) Anabolic steroids come in two main forms, **injectable** and **oral**.

INJECTABLE

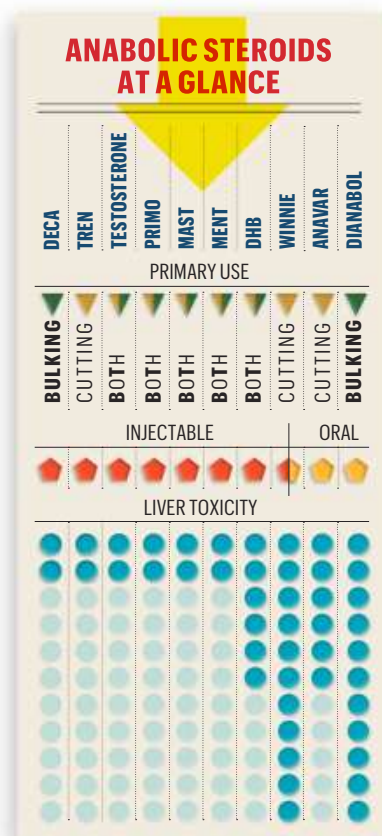
EXAMPLES: Testosterone, nandrolone (Deca-Durabolin or “Deca”), trenbolone (Finajet or “tren”), methenolone (Primobolan or “Primo”), drostanolone (Masteron or “Mast”), trestolone (“MENT”), dihydroboldenone (DHB).

SIDE EFFECTS: Testicular shrinkage; infertility; hair loss; mood swings; paranoia; gynecomastia; heart, liver, and kidney issues; and prostate cancer risk.

ORAL

EXAMPLES: Oxandrolone (Anavar), methandienone (Dianabol), stanozolol (Winstrol or “Winnie”).

SIDE EFFECTS: Testicular shrinkage; infertility; hair loss; mood swings; paranoia; gynecomastia; heart, liver, and kidney issues; and risk of prostate cancer—plus a more elevated risk of liver damage than with injectable steroids.



HOW EXTREME PEDs HURT THE BODY

► CLENBUTEROL

MADE FAMOUS by pro cyclist Alberto Contador, who attributed his failed drug test to tainted meat, clenbuterol is classified as a bronchodilator in countries where it's prescribed legally. (The U. S. isn't one of them.) Despite its main use in facilitating breathing, clenbuterol also has steroid-like effects, including an ability to elevate metabolism and support muscle building.

SIDE EFFECTS: Heart palpitations, tremors, anxiety, agitation, and insomnia.

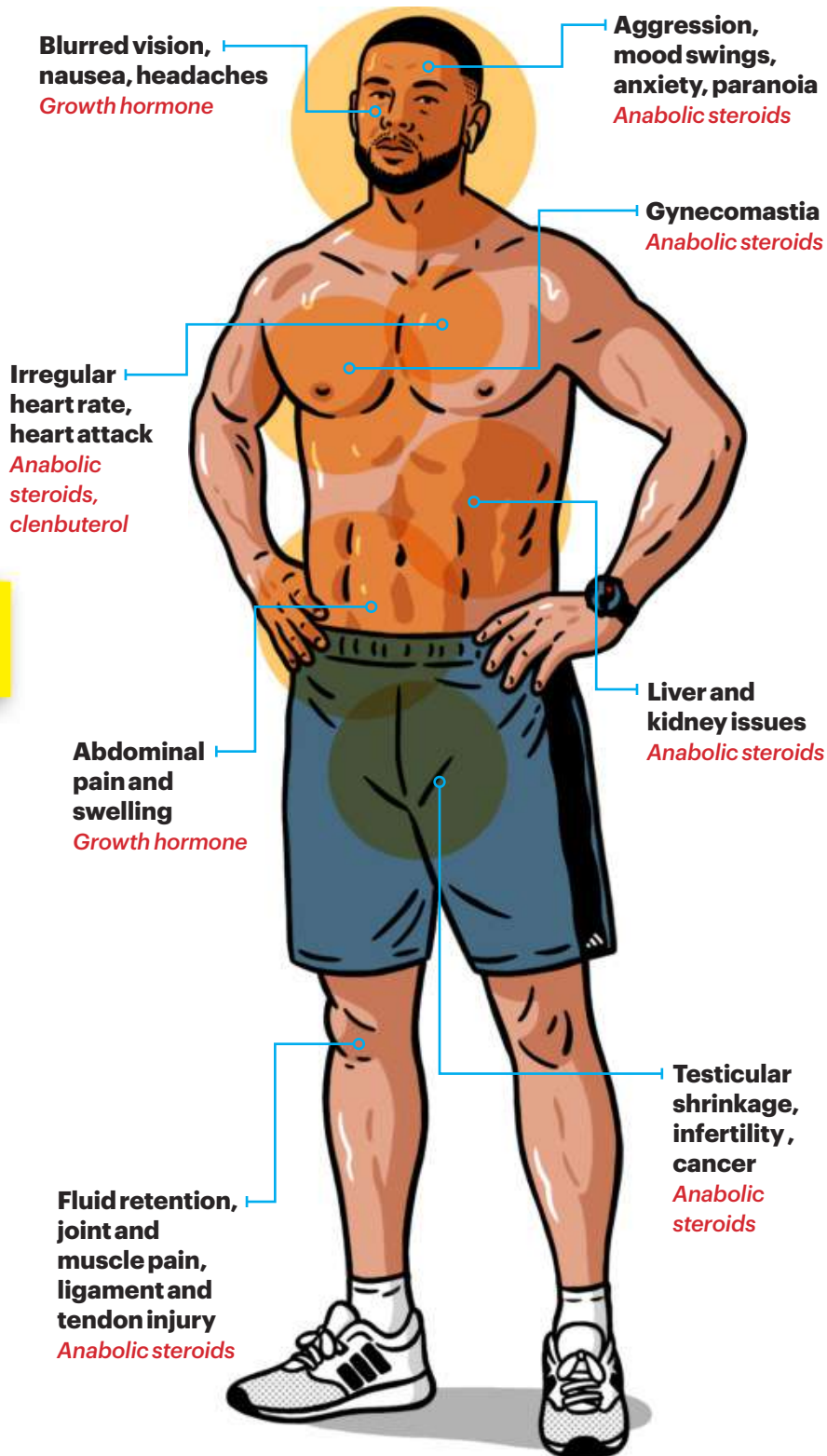
KNOW THIS: "This is a gnarly drug," says Israetel, adding that it feels like a super stimulant when you take it. So don't.

► GROWTH HORMONE (GH OR HGH)

SECRETED BY the pituitary gland, growth hormone is vital for regulating metabolism and stimulating growth in just about every bone and tissue in your body, including your muscles. Popular with bodybuilders (and allegedly Barry Bonds), GH, in addition to increasing muscle growth, minimizes fat gain and improves sleep quality.

SIDE EFFECTS: Mild ones include increased blood-sugar levels (a reason it's often stacked with insulin); fluid retention, which causes swelling in the extremities; and breast enlargement. Severe side effects include an increased risk of diabetes and certain cancers.

KNOW THIS: It's illegal unless you have a prescription. Two of the most potent ways to dial up GH production naturally are high-quality sleep and regular exercise that includes strength training.





THE KINDA SERIOUS STUFF



WTF ARE SARMS

THAT'S "selective androgen receptor modulators," and in the 1990s they were viewed as a safer alternative to steroids. Most commonly taken orally, SARMS remain popular (boxer Ryan Garcia failed a drug test for them recently) and are similar to steroids in that they target androgen receptors.

Examples: Andarine, Ostarine

Side effects: Testicular shrinkage, liver injury and failure, infertility, sexual dysfunction, sleep disturbances, and increased risk of heart attack and stroke.

Know this: They're considered a Schedule III controlled substance and not approved by the FDA for any current medical use. They're banned by the NCAA, the World Anti-Doping Agency, and the U.S. Department of Defense.

Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images (Schwarzenegger), Ron Vesely/MLB Photos/Getty Images (Canseco), Tim de Waale/Corbis/Getty Images (Armstrong)

▶ TRT TESTOSTERONE REPLACEMENT THERAPY

IF YOU HAVE low T (below 300ng/dl), you might experience a reduced sex drive, erectile dysfunction, fatigue, sleep issues, and difficulty building muscle and strength. That's where TRT comes in. Typically

administered in a medical setting with a prescription from a doc, "TRT can be life-changing," says Israetel. "Getting your T back up into the normal range can make you feel like you're 22 again—you'll have a greater zest for life and pack on muscle more easily."

SIDE EFFECTS: Acne, disturbed breathing during sleep, breast swelling or tenderness, and growth of the prostate.

KNOW THIS: If you have a normal T level, TRT is unlikely to make any difference at all.

▶ INSULIN

THIS NATURALLY occurring hormone regulates blood-glucose levels. Diabetics need to take insulin because their bodies don't produce enough (or any) of it, but it's also used by bodybuilders to facilitate protein synthesis

(i.e., muscle growth) by enhancing nutrient storage and inhibiting protein breakdown.

SIDE EFFECTS: Low blood sugar (hypoglycemia), which can result in fatigue, hunger, irritability, confusion, headache, irregular heartbeat, and (in severe cases) loss of consciousness, seizures, coma, and even death.

KNOW THIS: Because insulin tends to lower blood-sugar levels, it's important to pair it with the appropriate amount of carbs to prevent hypoglycemia.

▶ EPO ERYTHROPOIETIN

THIS HORMONE, made infamous by Lance Armstrong, is produced naturally by the kidneys to stimulate red-blood-cell production. But injecting the synthetic version can inflate that count, enhancing your body's

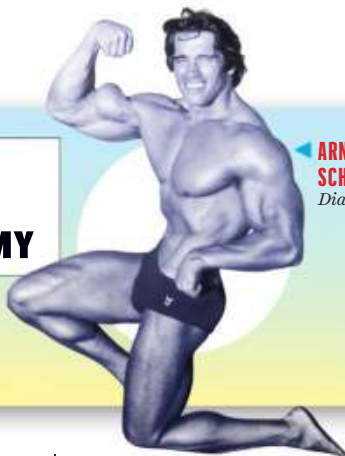
ability to transport oxygen to working muscles and skyrocketing your aerobic capacity and endurance. If you suffer from anemia caused by kidney disease, such injections prescribed by a doctor can be lifesaving. If you're an athlete? Well, EPO is banned by every major sport governing body.

SIDE EFFECTS: Elevated risk of pulmonary and cerebral embolism and heart disease.

KNOW THIS: "EPO is really only used by endurance athletes, especially cyclists," says Israetel, noting that any benefit is unlikely to outweigh the health risks.

PED HALL OF INFAMY

From exposed cover-ups to outright admissions, we've seen it all.



ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER
Dianabol

JOSE CANSECO
Winstrol, Anadrol, Equipoise, testosterone



LANCE ARMSTRONG
EPO, HGH, testosterone



THE OTHER STUFF

PEPTIDES

COMPOSED OF short chains of amino acids, peptides are signaling molecules that regulate various processes from metabolism to tissue growth. Synthetic versions claim to crank up fat burning, enhance sleep quality, or accelerate recovery.

Examples: BPC-157 (healing and recovery), MK-677 (muscle growth).
Side effects: TBD. The research on the short- and long-term risks of taking peptides is still evolving but points to hormone imbalance and even impaired pituitary function.
Know this: They're not all FDA approved; some are prescription only, to be administered by a physician. Some are illegal and banned for sport.

PROTEIN POWDER

YOUR MUSCLES need protein in order to recover from and adapt to any form of exercise. Most people don't eat close to the one gram of protein per pound of your desired body-weight per day that *MH* recommends, which makes supplementing critical.

Side effects: Dehydration and digestive issues.
Know this: Whey reigns supreme thanks to its "complete" amino-acid profile, but many plant proteins, especially soy and pea, work well, too.

CREATINE

CREATINE IS a compound made by your body and is in red meat, fish, and milk. It enhances your ability to generate quick bursts of energy and increase strength. By supplementing with 5mg of creatine a day, you can raise the amount stored, boosting its effect.

Side effects: Water retention in your muscle cells, which can add five to ten pounds of weight.
Know this: "Creatine monohydrate is one of the best-studied supplements," says Israetel. It's safe and effective when taken as directed.

BCAAs

SHORT FOR branched-chain amino acids, they're a common ingredient in many pre-workout products designed for fitness performance.

Side effects: Low blood sugar and gastrointestinal upset. If you take them as instructed, you have little to worry about. Use with caution if you have existing heart, liver, or kidney issues.
Know this: If a protein shake is a regular part of your routine, you can skip the additional BCAAs. "They're probably already in that shake," says Israetel. "So save your money."

BETA-ALANINE

A COMMON ingredient in pre-workout supplements, beta-alanine combines with another amino acid to buffer muscle acidification during extended or intense exercise. Translation: It may help fight muscle fatigue.

Side effects: Paresthesia—a mild, skin-tingling pins-and-needles sensation—soon after ingesting it. It's harmless and passes quickly, but if it bothers you, reduce your dose.
Know this: Like creatine, beta-alanine takes up to a month to build to sufficient levels in your cells and make a difference in your workout. If you decide to include it, take it consistently.

HERBAL TESTOSTERONE BOOSTERS

SOME plant-based supplements claim to naturally crank T production.
Examples: Tongkat ali, *Fadogia agrestis*, *Tribulus terrestris*.
Know this: A lack of human studies and FDA regulation means that nobody has a solid grasp on the hazards of taking these supplements in the short or long term. "They stimulate so little muscle growth that it's almost undetectable," says Israetel.

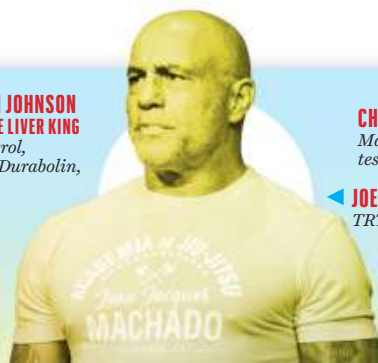
Mike Powell/Allsport/Getty Images (Johnson), Mega/GC Images/Getty Images (Liver King), Carmen Mandato/Getty Images (Rogan), Chris Bernacchi/Diamond Images/Getty Images (Burnstead).



BEN JOHNSON
Frazalon



BRIAN JOHNSON
aka THE LIVER KING
Winstrol,
Deca-Durabolin,
HGH



JOE ROGAN
TRT, HGH

CHRIS BUMSTEAD
Masteron,
testosterone, tren



Just over a year ago, **Kekoa Lansford** watched from a hilltop as the **Maui wildfires** incinerated his hometown. While others fled to safety, he ran into the flames to save as many lives as he could. Today, the scars from that blaze—**one of the deadliest** in the U.S. in more than a century—remain. Where do Kekoa and the rest of the survivors **go from here?**



A Merciless Sun

BY ERIKA HAYASAKI



PHOTOGRAPHS BY
MAX WHITTAKER



THE PUNGENT STAIN

of a stranger's burnt flesh seeped into the passenger seat of his Toyota Tundra as Kekoa Lansford drove toward his girlfriend's apartment on the dark early morning of August 9, 2023. He parked and stumbled into her living room, wearing shorts, a Hawaiian Special Forces tank top, and melted flip-flops. She lived in a safe zone, six miles north of the inferno that only hours earlier had turned his hometown of Lahaina, on the northwest coast of Maui, into a living hell.

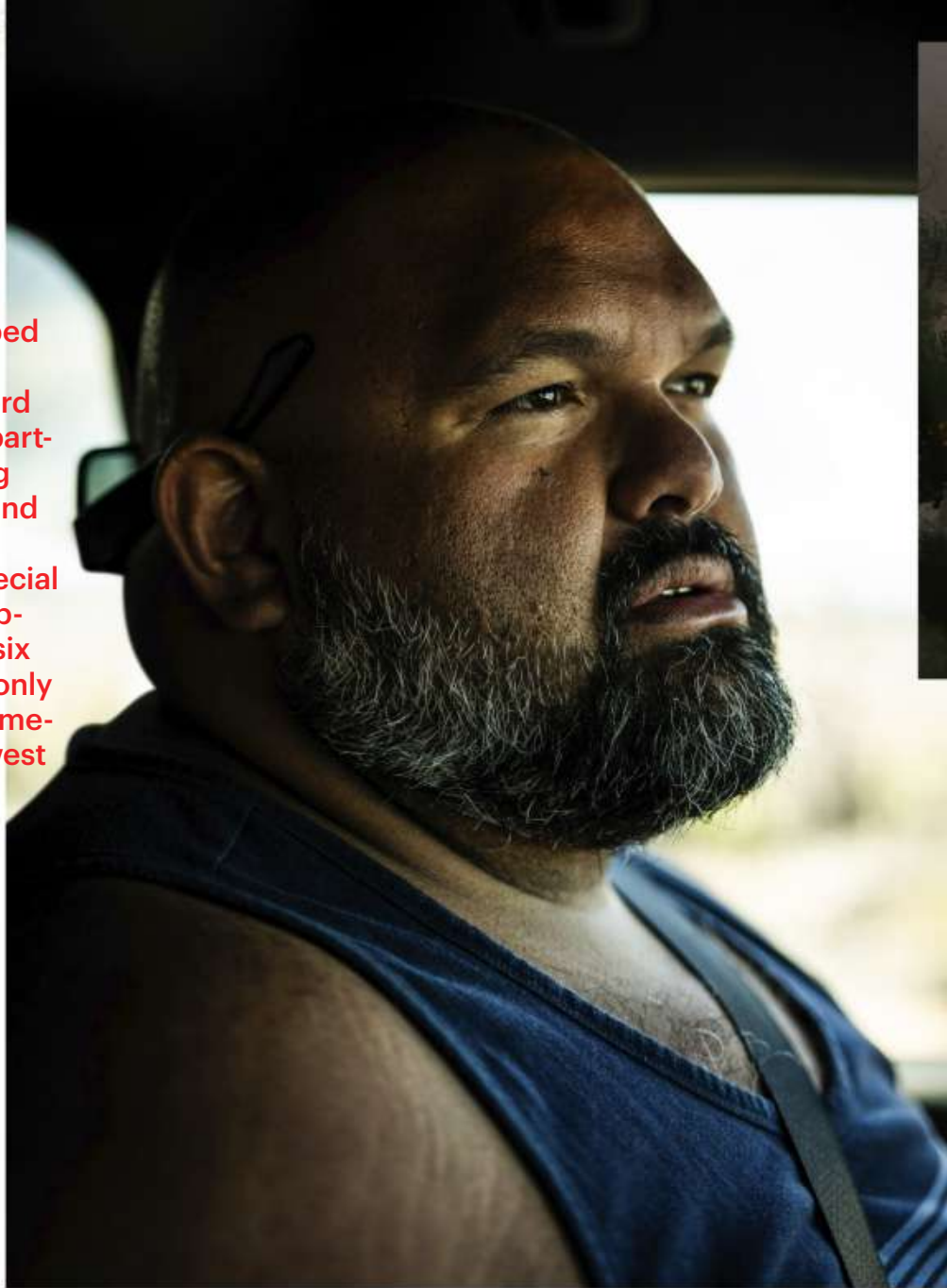
His girlfriend, Dani Fravega, a painter and tattoo artist, put her hand on his chest. At six feet three inches tall, he stood nearly as high as the flammable guinea grass brought to the island by European cattle ranchers in the 19th century. It crawled between slopes and roads around Lahaina, swiftly bursting into flames in what would become one of the deadliest wildfires in the U.S. in more than a century. Kekoa, 36, was built like a barrel of bourbon, and his bald head shined with sweat. Particles of ash stuck to his skin. His beard smelled of smoke. He had always exuded an air of invincibility, but now he looked completely sapped. He would not be okay after this. No one from Lahaina would.

Kekoa's heart hammered. "I can't fucking think or breathe right now," he told Dani. In the coming days, his heart would race so abnormally fast that doctors would have to perform a cardioversion, using medicine and electric shocks to restore it to normal. Dani could not comprehend what Kekoa had seen over the past ten hours. And he could not yet begin to describe it.

"Take a deep breath," she said to him, tapping ice to his forehead. But Kekoa struggled to calm down or shake off the sounds that followed him: A grown man crying for his mother. Cars exploding. People screaming as they burned alive. He had not been able to save them all.

THE WINDS

THE MORNING BEFORE, on August 8, it was ferociously hot and windy. Already the air smelled of



parched weeds. Kekoa had been up since 7:00 A.M. attempting to gather coconuts, which he sold to tourists on Front Street—a popular area lined with shops and restaurants—for \$10 to \$15 a pop. He checked on his coconut supply, which he had stacked in a kiddie pool in his yard—a modest yard with Italian cypress trees and plumerias with white and pink flowers. He had inherited the simple white house at 489 Ilikahi Street, with its slate-colored shingles and covered front patio, from his grandmother. He noticed the wind had pulled the plastic pool out from beneath the coconuts, leaving them scattered across his property.

These particular gusts, known to locals as the Kaua'ula winds, were so powerful they could send 3,000-pound dumpsters soaring. On this day, they were exacerbated by Hurricane Dora, a category 4 storm brewing in the Pacific Ocean. The Kaua'ula winds did not arrive often. Once, more than 70 years ago, they destroyed the towering steeple of a historic Lahaina church, right near Kekoa's home. These winds alone could flatten a town.

Kekoa headed northeast, up Lahainaluna Road, to check on weather conditions. He was about a mile from his home when he saw smoke. At 6:36 A.M., residents had reported flames in a field thick with overgrown, highly



■ Far left: Kekoa driving around the island in June 2024. Left: A historic Lahaina church and temple engulfed in flames during the wildfires.

like jet stream straight into Lahaina. A tsunami of smoke descended upon Kekoa's neighborhood. He

watched from above as residents stood on their roofs, trying to escape the flames, their homes burning around them. They could not outrun the fire. Kekoa saw it all. His own house, he knew, had also been incinerated.

Below him, officers patrolling Lahaina had begun to realize the terrifying magnitude of the fast-moving fires. Police body-camera footage would show them spraying a spot fire with a garden hose, waiting for firefighters as plumes of brown smoke billowed above. Officers ran through the smoke-filled streets yelling at people to leave. Still no official evacuation order had gone out.

At first, from above the scene, Kekoa thought, *Thank God I got out of there.* Because of the high

flammable grass along that same road. Power lines, he later learned, had toppled from the wind, igniting a three-acre brush fire. The area was in a drought, with already combustible conditions compounded by the wind and the soaring temperatures brought on by climate change.

Rotating fire crews doused the flames with 23,000 gallons of water, until the ground smoldered. The situation seemed under control, and by 9:00 A.M. the fire department had declared the flames extinguished, the blaze "100 percent contained." But the winds did not let up.

By 2:18 P.M., the fire crews had climbed into their trucks and left the Lahainaluna Road site. They had spent nearly seven hours tackling the fire there and seemed certain it was out. The morning's wildfire area was now charred but not ablaze. They returned to the station to rest and eat lunch.

Meanwhile, a Hawaiian Electric Company emergency crew went to the area to make repairs. Not long after arriving, the crew spotted smoke and flames in the same field where the morning fire had started. Fire experts know that embers can hide in ash pits and obscure crannies, only to reignite hours, days, or even weeks later. They can travel up to five miles away in high winds, setting an entirely different area aflame. The power crew and neighbors called 911 to report the brush fire. It was just before 3:00 P.M.

In his Tundra, Kekoa had by now driven a mile north along the Lahaina shoreline to check on his son at his ex's home in the neighborhood of Wahikuli. It seemed safe so far, so he headed back into Lahaina, cutting up a dirt road that overlooked Lahainaluna Road and the town below. In an instant, from his vantage point atop the hill, Kekoa heard the bone-rattling howl of the powerful Kaua'ula winds. They roared and thundered through valleys, rocking buildings and cars, and ripping roofs from houses. The winds inhaled the wildfire, sucking its smoke plumes into a vortex before changing directions and shooting a Godzilla-

winds, there were no helicopters pouring water down below. All around, he saw people running, falling, crying, screaming. To him it felt like the town had its own heartbeat, pounding, pounding. It was the sound of a place running for its life.

He called his son's mother. When she picked up the phone, Kekoa was frantic. He told her the wildfire was completely out of control.

"It's not going to come over here," she told him.

"Bruh, this fucker is moving," he said. "Just to be careful, grab him. Now. Go!"

But he could tell she didn't understand how serious this was. Neither she nor anyone around her had gotten any notice to leave. It would be at least another three hours before police began evacuating residents from Wahikuli.

Kekoa's instincts told him Wahikuli was next. He headed down the back roads toward the neighborhood, passing cars along the way. He heard propane tanks exploding behind him. *Boom. Boom.* Were cars exploding, too? Car belts. Gas pistons. Engines. And blasts that sounded like ammo. *Ping. Ping. Ping.* Aluminum popping.

He made it to his ex-wife's neighborhood and began beeping his horn at neighbors: "You guys gotta get the fuck out of here right now!" They could hear the explosions all the way in Wahikuli. Some were already leaving. Traffic started to clog.

"It's time to move," Kekoa yelled.

He drove up to a gated off-road owned by private developers. The gate was open. Someone had already cut the lock. "Come up this way." Residents began streaming out through the back roads, away from the burning neighborhoods.

His ex and their son made it out. But Kekoa turned around. He had left his dog, Rudy, a pit bull, at home. Even though he knew his neighborhood was annihilated, he believed Rudy would be okay. "He's like Houdini," Kekoa says: able to escape anywhere. But he also could not stop thinking about his neighbors. So many still trapped.

If I can navigate this and use my brain, I should be okay, Kekoa told himself. *I can help a couple of people.* It was just before 5:00 P.M. He turned back toward Lahaina, straight toward the flames.

HELL ON EARTH

KEKOA RACED THROUGH a hail of embers, thousands of pieces of wood shooting through the sky like spears dipped in fire. The air crackled. Power poles down everywhere. He assumed the lines still had electricity pulsing



■ Firefighters continue to douse the flames across the island in the following days. Below left: Kekoa speaks to a newscaster on the morning of August 9.



through them. He avoided them, making it half a mile away, close to an old restaurant on Front Street, where patrons used to watch whales and enjoy ocean sunsets.

Out of the smoke came a woman, stumbling. Kekoa spotted her immediately and slowed. People started beeping their horns. He could see that her feet were burned. Kekoa called the woman into his truck. She got in and he whipped the truck around, shooting back up Honoapiʻilani Highway, driving on roadsides to the evacuation shelter at the Lahaina Civic Center. He dropped her off to wait for an ambulance. Then he turned around and went back.

This time, Kekoa spotted another woman not far from the restaurant, her back and legs badly burned. He picked her up and sat her in his back seat. She screamed in pain. “You’ll be okay,” he said.

He drove back toward the civic center and dropped her at an ambulance. Her burned skin left a layer of pink pasty film on his seat. He turned his truck around again. Before he could make it into the smoke, more people stumbled out of it. He lost track of how many. People jumping in and out of his truck, desperate to get as far away from the flames as possible.

As the emergency operations center remained out of touch with what was actually unfolding on the ground, Kekoa continued shuttling burn victims and other survivors two miles north to the civic center. He went back into the smoke again. He parked less than

a block away from the same area as before. He could hear people yelling for help. He got out of his truck and started walking toward them.

He breathed in the smoke and felt the heat pressing onto his feet through his flip-flops, like stepping on a bed of nails. He spotted another woman, barely walking and badly burned. He put her over his shoulder. She was heavy. Kekoa already suffered from gout in one foot. He stumbled. Another man nearby

helped him as he attempted to carry the woman to his truck. Kekoa kneeled to the ground trying to steady himself. In seconds, smoke surrounded him. He could not see his way back. It was totally dark. No way out.

Kekoa had never been a religious man. He had never been any portrait of morality or virtue, and certainly not the hero type. He had made mistakes, poor decisions. In 2019, after he saw a police officer “manhandle” his girlfriend, he hit him hard enough that the officer’s glasses broke. “I messed up,” Kekoa said in court. “It won’t happen again.” The judge ordered him to take anger-management classes.

Today, however, he prayed. *Oh God, don’t let me die. Please. I’ll never do drugs again. Please.*

Just then, a tiny opening peeked through the depths of darkness. It was just big enough for him to see a path out.

He made one more trip to the civic center before driving to Dani’s around 9:00 P.M. He tried to rest and calm down, but it was impossible. Kekoa left her apartment around 2:00 A.M., this time bringing his cousin and nephew with him to see if they could find any more survivors. They encountered a man and a woman with three cats in a cage who had survived all this time in the ocean. Kekoa recognized them. They were the parents of a friend of his. They climbed into his truck. On the road out, the winds started to pick up again. A pole came crashing down. If it had hit his truck, they all would have been crushed to death.

Still pumping with adrenaline, Kekoa got the couple to safety, gave up the mission, and returned to Dani’s. Then, after the sun rose, he got into his truck again and drove back into Lahaina on his own. By now the fire had burned all the way down to the ocean, fuming out. He had to see what was left.

Walking through the blackened town, still empty and untended, he encountered a local television journalist. On camera, Kekoa unleashed an emotional plea. “We’ve still got dead bodies,” he said. “In the water. Floating. And

“I just get winded quicker. And then I feel like I have this impending doom sometimes, for no reason.”

on the sea wall. We’ve been pulling people out since last night, trying to save people’s lives. And I feel like we’re not getting the help we need.”

Kekoa put his face in his hands, breaking. The fire, which burned more than 2,100 acres in Lahaina and another 4,500 acres across the rest of the island, would not be declared 100 percent contained for 51 days. In the months that followed, Kekoa would only continue to crumble. “This is a nationwide issue,” he said, his voice trembling as he shouted into the camera. “We need help. A lot of help.”

WHEN THE SMOKE CLEARS

TODAY, JUST OVER a year later, memories of the fire curl into his consciousness without warning, like cascades of smoke, overtaking everything, everywhere. Kekoa has spent the past 12 months trying to breathe, recover, sleep. He wheezes. “I just get winded quicker,” he says. Ever since the fires, he’s had a chronic cough. “It’s kind of scary. It just comes out of nowhere,” he says. “And then I feel like I have this impending doom sometimes, for no reason.”

Many of Maui’s survivors, like Kekoa, are still in a very dark place, even as the tourists swing golf clubs on lush green oceanside courses, steps from the towering hotels that still house people who lost their homes in the flames. Life here feels incongruent. In one resort, which long served as a Red Cross shelter and is now open to guests, there are reminders about family popcorn and movie nights on the lawn, alongside flyers for Hui Kāne, a weekly support group for men impacted by the fires.

Kekoa feels like the world has forgotten about Lahaina and what his people have gone through. The historic town experienced the most devastation from the fires, which killed 102 people, displaced at least 8,000, and resulted in billions of dollars in damage. A severe housing shortage existed on the island long before the fires, but health and housing issues are now reaching a breaking point. Displaced survivors were living in 40 hotels on the island in the days immediately after their homes were destroyed. Since this summer, however, evacuees have been relocating out of hotels and into other temporary homes at a rate of more than 200 people a week. For most, housing and job concerns have taken precedence over their own mental health. But the issues are entwined, as a lack of stability and the struggle to fulfill basic needs fuel depression and anxiety.

In a study that aims to track at least 1,000 Maui wildfire survivors over a ten-year period, more than half of the survivors

What was left of Lahaina days after the fires.

surveyed so far have reported symptoms of depression, and nearly half have reported worsening health problems, including high blood pressure and respiratory issues. Nearly one third of them have moderate to severe anxiety, and about 4.4 per-

cent have had recent thoughts of committing suicide. The study also reveals that 13 percent of survivors do not have health insurance, exacerbated by the fact that nearly half of them lost their jobs in the fires, and 20 percent were still unemployed as of February 2024. Almost half of the households affected by the wildfires are experiencing low food security. Yet this past May, Hawaii’s Emergency Management Agency ended its program to provide meals to survivors still living in hotels.

No one simply snaps back to normal after a catastrophic weather-related event. Not even those who made it out uninjured, or who did not lose homes, or whose loved ones did not die. Maui received \$17.3 million in federal funding for mental health assistance in the wake of the wildfires, which has gone toward the support of door-to-door wellness navigators in hotel shelters, telepsychiatry and counseling services, group healing services, and the hiring of more behavioral health clinicians and providers.

But Lahaina has only one behavioral health clinic left standing, and there was already a shortage of psychiatrists, psychologists, and therapists across Hawaii. At least three other clinics that provided mental health services were destroyed by the flames, along with private practices. That lone remaining location, tucked near tennis courts and the community center on a hill overlooking the ocean, has become a go-to hub for families needing psychological assistance. But even with access to a funded clinic with a friendly staff, there is a reluctance among residents to seek mental health services, partly due to the cultural stigma or to denial, or because other needs, like housing, are so great and people are just trying to survive day by day.

SURVIVAL MODE

AFTER THE NEWS video of Kekoa went viral, someone set up a GoFundMe page for him. People sent \$18,000 in donations. But Kekoa felt survivor’s guilt, thinking of the families whose loved ones did not make it out alive. He thought of the people he had not been able to save. Parents, grandparents, children, siblings. He says he sent the donations he received to their families.

Since the fires, Kekoa hasn’t been able to find steady work—his coconut business evaporated. He has been living with Dani, but her lease will be up soon and the rent is increasing. He tried to build two tiny houses on the gravel lot where his home once stood. But he ran into red tape. Government rules, he says, will not allow the tiny homes on the lot, though they will let him put



an RV on his land. However, Kekoa is a big dude and could not imagine cramming into an RV with his girlfriend and son. “It’s like they have all these rules for us, but they don’t have any answers for us.” The stress of everything, he says, is “probably cutting 20 years off my life.”

It took four months for Kekoa to take Dani to see the burn zone. He still hadn’t told her about all he had seen. When they arrived, she just started crying profusely. The devastation had not really hit her until that moment. But for Kekoa, every fiery image—each person he carried to safety and each body he could not—is burned inside his brain. He lost everything in the fires—photos, all his paperwork, his birth certificate, his grandma’s antique silverware set from the Royal Hawaiian Kingdom. He never did find his dog. “I think he just cooked to oblivion.”

Before the fires, Kekoa did not struggle with his mental health. Now, he says, the depression is real. “Sometimes I get self-pity,” he says. “Like ‘Oh, I’m by myself in the world.’” He manages to pull himself out of it. He’ll go outside. Run into a neighbor, a loved one, a kind soul, people in his community working so hard to rebuild and recover. “Everybody loves everybody, you know?”

Kekoa has not gone to any group support meetings himself, but he likes the idea for other survivors. He has not sought treatment at the Lahaina behavioral clinic or from any therapist, for that matter. “I would make them go crazy,” he says. His burden is too much. “I just don’t deal with my own mental health. I have an ex-wife, and I have a girlfriend and a son. Everybody’s mental health,” he says, “I carry.”

Alika Maunakea, Ph.D., a professor at the John A. Burns School of Medicine at the University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa, who coauthored the wildfire survivor study, says there tend to be more female than male survivors of the Maui wildfires utilizing the free health screenings. And even when women come in with their partners, the guys typically don’t participate in them. “It does speak to avoidance—they either don’t want to know their results or they don’t want to worry their families about it,” he says. “It’s ironic because these men who avoid care for the sake of caring for their families only end up making it harder for their families in the long run.”

At the Lahaina Behavioral Health Clinic, part of the Hawai‘i Department of Health’s Adult Mental Health Division, program manager John Oliver says the doors are open for survivors, like Kekoa, who may only now be starting to emerge from the aftermath and realize how much they need mental health support. Lahaina, whose name means “cruel” or “merciless” sun in Native Hawaiian, is known for its dry, hot



climate. But there is a particular kind of mercilessness that the people of Lahaina now understand, too: the way the fire’s trauma can take hold of the mind and not let go.

“I NEED HELP”

SCIENTISTS PREDICT THAT by the end of the century, the risk of wildfires could increase by as much as 57 percent worldwide due to climate change, potentially leading to more people seeing their neighborhoods go up in flames. Mental and physical health in the face of rising climate anxiety and trauma need serious global attention, and the World Health Organization is urging countries to integrate mental health care into their policy responses to climate change. But so far, according to its survey of 95 countries, only nine have included mental health support in their plans.

To build more prepared and resilient communities that can better withstand climate disasters, Maunakea says Maui, and the rest of the world, might take guidance from the “wraparound” services that were established to support survivors of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. In the federal World Trade Center Health Program, they receive regular yearly mental and physical health checkups. Case management teams partner with social workers and clinicians to ensure that survivors are getting proper care, and to follow up with those who’ve moved away. This integrated health and tracking system continues today.

“Like 9/11, we’re going to need a similar type of specialized care for survivors from these kinds of tragedies,” Maunakea says. Not only to address the trauma, he explains, but also to screen for environmental exposures and the physical and mental repercussions of natural disasters like wildfires, from cancer to heart problems to depression.



■ A memorial for the wildfire victims that's still preserved a year later.

But what happens when survivors don't want to take advantage of these resources? In Lahaina, 38 percent of the population identifies as Asian American and 8.5 percent as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Suicide is the leading cause of death for Asian Americans aged 15 to 25 and the second leading cause of death in this population between ages 25 and 34. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders aged 15 to 34. Yet there is often a reluctance to seek services for mental health or substance abuse in these communities.

Kekoa has witnessed this firsthand. He's encountered survivors around Lahaina who find it more comfortable to "talk story," as locals call it, with him. "What would you do if the thoughts in your head are consuming your life? You get help. What do you do if you get diabetes, you get brain cancer, you break your foot? You get help," Kekoa says. For the mind's health, "there's no difference. There's no shame. It's all love." And yet for all his words of encouragement when it comes to others seeking mental health support, he has yet to take his own advice. He adds: "I just don't want to."

To combat the stigma and denial, local governments must respect the cultural nuances of their communities by having a plan to communicate through language differences and promote culturally relevant healing practices, like spiritual sharing circles and

meditation. The combination of these practices and modern counseling services can make a significant difference in alleviating the physical and mental suffering of survivors. But it takes time to implement a program like this—time that's of the essence, as natural disasters have been linked to an increased risk of self-harm and suicide even years following the event and as mental health assistance programs eventually expire—and it's much harder to do in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.

Oliver recalls one Asian American man who fled the fires by jumping into the ocean, where he survived for six hours with severe burns on his legs and other parts of his body, only to end up in a shelter after his release from the hospital. For months he couldn't relax and had trouble sleeping and participating in normal activities. Still, he didn't seek treatment. On a recent day, however, he showed up to the Lahaina behavioral health clinic. He walked past the plumeria tree blooming with pink petals and through the doors. He approached the front desk and quietly told the clerk, "I need help."

THE HEART OF LAHAINA

KEKOA'S MOTHER DIED when he was born. Her mom, Kekoa's grandma, raised him as if he were her son. She used to poke his belly, pinching it. "What is this?" she joked. "Can I have some of this?"

His grandmother, from whom he inherited his house, passed away at age 84, eight months before the fires leveled Lahaina. She was a Filipina and Spanish woman who made leis of feathers, orchids, and dried banana fibers, carefully braiding and twisting the garlands by hand. She gave them as symbols of honor, peace, and love to her Lahaina neighbors for graduations, weddings, and other celebrations. Native Hawaiian women would joke to Kekoa, "Your grandma is more Hawaiian than me." Her husband was a Native

Hawaiian who showed his love for his grandkids by teaching them the stories that had been passed down to him.

One family legend that Kekoa has never forgotten is about his great-grandfather, a Native Hawaiian whom he resembles. Many years ago, a school in Lahaina caught fire. Kekoa's great-grandfather ran inside and saved the people from the flames.

All Kekoa ever wanted was to put respect on his ancestors' names. His grandparents worked multiple jobs in Maui's tourist and service industry to support six children and pay for their home, which was now in ruins. Kekoa's grandmother often volunteered to cook meals for the Canoe Club, showing her love through her actions. "What you get from me here is in what I do," she told him. "I cannot talk this. But I do this." Kekoa thought of how hard they worked for their home. If his grandma had been alive to watch the destruction of her beloved Lahaina, it would have destroyed her.

But she was there. Kekoa felt her, along with his grandfather, and his great-grandfather, and his father's father—a World War II veteran who served on Iwo Jima. "Men of action," Kekoa says. He sensed all of their spirits kicking in. Taking over his own actions.

He talked to his ancestors that day. And if, God forbid, another fire happened, he would do it again, with their strength holding him. He thinks about Lahaina, his roots here, all the men he grew up with, learned from. Men who have it in their DNA to take care of their people. "The toughest fucking guys I know," he says. "This is our community. We're from Lahaina. We don't leave people behind. We just don't roll like that." ■

ERIKA HAYASAKI is an independent journalist based in southern California.



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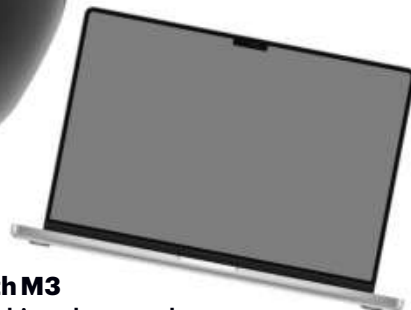
TIMBALAND

The legendary music producer recently lost more than 100 pounds and is now making arenas jump on Missy Elliott's Out of This World tour. Here's what keeps him on beat.

BY CHARLES THORP



6. Sonos Ace
◀ "I'm the master of sound, so the headphones have to be right," he says. Active noise cancellation. Thirty-hour battery life. Brain-altering surround sound. **\$449; sonos.com**



5. 14-Inch Apple MacBook Pro with M3
▶ "I don't need anything else to make my music; it's like carrying a studio around with you." Timbaland says he upgrades his model whenever a new one is released. **From \$1,599; apple.com**

4. Ethika Crew Socks
▶ You can usually find the producer head-to-toe in Ethika gear. "I just love how their fabrics feel," he says. "I'm the kind of guy who wants to be comfortable, and their socks never fail me." **\$12; ethika.com**



1. Vivobarefoot Primus Lite III
◀ With minimalist 2mm outsoles, they're a 180 from the overstuffed sneakers he used to wear. "Finding these has changed everything, giving me better posture, and now my feet feel great," he says. **\$160; vivobarefoot.com**

2. Outliers, by Malcolm Gladwell
▶ In his downtime, Timbaland listens to book excerpts online and reads on his phone. He says he recently connected with Gladwell's 10,000-hour rule and has been studying it since. **\$14; amazon.com**



3. Louis Vuitton Discovery Backpack MM
◀ "I travel a lot and I don't want to be carrying around all of this luggage," Timbaland says. "I make sure that everything I need fits into a backpack." **\$2,850; louisvuitton.com**

Men's Health (ISSN 1054-4836) Vol. 39, No. 5 is published bimonthly, by Hearst at 300 W. 57th St., New York, NY 10019. Steven R. Swartz, President & Chief Executive Officer; William R. Hearst III, Chairman; Frank A. Bennack, Jr., Executive Vice Chairman. Hearst Magazines, Inc.: Debi Chirichella, President; Regina Buckley, Chief Financial and Strategy Officer & Treasurer; Catherine A. Boston, Secretary. Copyright 2024 by Hearst Magazines, Inc. All rights reserved. Men's Health is a registered trademark of Hearst Magazines, Inc. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send all UAA to GFS. (See DMN 5071.5.2); NON-POSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: Send address changes to Men's Health Customer Service, P.O. Box 6000, Harlan, IA 51593-1500. IN CANADA: Postage paid at Gateway, Mississauga, Ontario; Canada Post International Publication Mail (Canadian Distribution) Sales Agreement No. 40012499. Postmaster (Canada): Send returns and address changes to Men's Health magazine, P.O. Box 927, Stn Main, Markham ON L3P 9Z9 (GST# R122988611). Mailing Lists: From time to time we make our subscriber list available to companies that sell goods and services by mail that we believe would interest our readers. If you would rather not receive such mailings by postal mail, please send your current mailing label or exact copy to: Men's Health, Mail Preference Center, P.O. Box 6000, Harlan, IA, 51593. You can also visit preferences.hearstmags.com to manage your preferences and opt out of receiving marketing offers by email. Customer Service: Visit menshealth.com/service or write to Men's Health Customer Service, P.O. Box 6000, Harlan, IA 51593-1500.



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