

## Everything You Know About Fitness is a Lie

Posted By Daniel Duane On January 21, 2011 @ 3:06 pm In *Features, Mind & Body*

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Photograph by Frederik Broden

Gym machines are boring, CrossFit is sadistic, and dieting sucks. Luckily, none of them is essential to being truly fit. Through years of trial and error — and humiliation at the hands of some of the world's top trainers — the author discovered the secrets to real health.

by Daniel Duane

I hate the gym. At least, I hate “the gym” as imagined by the modern American health club: the mindless repetitions on the weight machines, halfhearted crunches, daytime TV during the treadmill. Such a sad, unimaginative excuse for a life, when I could be out rock-climbing, surfing, or, hell, even just scrubbing the bathroom floor. But I love working out the way I've come to understand it, and two big discoveries made all the difference.

First, I realized that we all live in a kind of Fitness Fog, a miasma of lies and misinformation that we mistake for common sense, and that makes most of our gym time a complete waste. Second, and by far the bigger news, I finally figured out what gyms good for and exactly how a man can use them to make himself healthy and fit in the truest sense: strong, capable, and durable in the long-lasting way that doesn't just ward off chronic disease but actually lets a 35-year-old desk drone carry both of his laughing children up a mountain, simultaneously, and take on serious skiing at age 40, trusting his knees to bend deep and firm.

Muscle withers away if you're not constantly building it, and muscle withers faster as a man ages. Fading muscle mass gives way to fat gain, stiff joints, stumbling-old-man balance, and a serious drop-off in weekend fun, not to mention self-esteem. But if you fight back right, it can all go the other way. And this means getting strong. The bottom line is that not only can lifting weights do as much for your heart health as cardio workouts, but it also provides you with a lean-muscle coat of armor against life's inevitable blows — the way it did for my own father, who broke his back in a climbing accident at age 69, spent months in bed, and recovered strong only because he'd been lifting for 35 years.

Not that I haven't wasted time at the gym like everybody else, sweating dutifully three times a week, “working my core,” throwing in the odd after-work jog. A few years ago, newly neck-deep in what Anthony Quinn describes in *Zorba the Greek* as “Wife, children, house...the full catastrophe,” I signed a 10-page membership contract at a corporate-franchise gym, hired my first personal trainer, and became yet another sucker for all the half-baked, largely spurious non-advice cobbled together from doctors, newspapers, magazines, infomercials, websites, government health agencies, and, especially, from the organs of our wonderful \$19 billion fitness industry, whose real knack lies in helping us to lose weight around the middle of our wallets. Not that all of these people are lying, but here's what I've learned: Their goals are only marginally related to real fitness — goals like reducing the statistical incidence of heart disease across the entire American population, or keeping you moving through the gym so you won't crowd the gear, or limiting the likelihood that you'll get hurt and sue.

We're not innocent. Too many of us drift into health clubs with only the vaguest of notions about why we're actually there — notions like maybe losing a little weight, somehow looking like the young Brad Pitt in *Fight Club*, or just heeding a doctor's orders. Vague goals beget vague methods; the unfocused mind is the vulnerable mind, deeply susceptible to bullshit. So we sign our sorry names on the elliptical-machine waiting list — starting with a little “cardio,” like somebody said you're supposed to — and then spend our allotted 30 minutes in front of a TV mounted a regulation seven to 10 feet away, because lawyers have told gym owners that seven to 10 feet minimizes the likelihood that we'll crane our necks, lose our balance, and face-

plant on the apparatus. After that, if we've got any remaining willpower, we lie flat on the floor, contract a few stomach muscles with tragic optimism, and then we "work each body part" before hitting the shower.

Go one better — I certainly did — by hiring a staff trainer and telling him you're serious about your once-in-a-while surfing, skiing, or cycling, and that you'd love help designing a "sport-specific" routine. Forget that your trainer knows literally nothing about these sports; he'll gladly prescribe a whole suite of cool stability-ball "functional fitness" and "core-training" exotica with rubber bands and wobbly Bosu platforms. Maybe it'll even be fun. After a while, though, when you still can't tell if anything ever makes a difference, you'll get bored all over again, quit all over again, and wonder why 21st-century American fitness looks so much like 21st-century dieting, something we labor at constantly while our bodies hardly change.

My own epiphany actually hit me in a roundabout way, over the course of a couple of years — humiliation at the hands of a special-ops trainer, being told I was unfit to bench-press by the 1999 Mr. Olympia — but I somehow bumbled my way into a parallel universe of American fitness, one in which men know exactly how to get strong. And none of it is rocket science. Even more shocking? None of it takes any more time than you already spend working out. Maybe it takes even less.



#### TRUTH 1: YOUR GYM IS YOUR ENEMY.

You've seen it a hundred times — the same thing I saw upon walking into my first brand-name franchise gym: roughly 5 percent taken up by free weights; 5 percent by stretching areas; 50 percent by cardio machines; 50 percent by weight machines. Any reasonable person might conclude that cardio and weight machines are the best gear for getting fit. They're not. Nobody thinks they are — not even the people who make them or the gym owners who buy them.

How many times have you been told to start with a little stretching? Yet multiple studies of pre-workout stretching demonstrate that it actually raises your likelihood of injury and lowers your subsequent performance. Turns out muscles that aren't warmed up don't really stretch anyway, and tugging on them just firms up their resistance to a wider range of motion. In fact, limbering up even has a slackening effect on your muscles, reducing their stability and the amount of

power and strength they'll generate.

Cardio machines are innocent enough, as they won't actually make you any less fit, but maintaining cardiovascular fitness doesn't really take much more than breathing uncomfortably hard for about 20 minutes, three times a week. And we all know that swimming, hoops, bike riding, and even Ultimate Frisbee can get the job done, and that treadmills or elliptical trainers are a pale substitute.

Weight machines, on the other hand, are far more insidious because they appear to be a huge technological advance over free weights. But quite the opposite is true: Weight machines train individual muscles in isolation, while the rest of you sits completely inert. This works okay for physical therapy and injury rehab, and it's passable for bodybuilding, but every serious strength-and-conditioning coach in America will tell you that muscle-isolation machines don't create real-world strength for life and sport.

Most gyms do include a few token free weights, but think about where you'll find them: around the edges of the room, like fresh fruits and vegetables in a supermarket that gives all the prime middle-of-the-store shelf space to Frosted Flakes and frozen cheesecake. Truly indispensable gear — like the good old-fashioned adjustable barbell rack, the sine qua non of any remotely serious gym — has, by contrast, become a downright rarity. As for niche but no less important equipment like an Olympic lifting platform, forget about it: The lawyers would never let it through the door.

Here's the problem: If you're in the fitness-equipment business, free weights are a loser. The 2010 model looks too much like the 1950 model, and they both last forever. Far better to create gleaming \$4,000 contraptions that can be reinvented every two years, and then hire a PR firm to promote some made-up training theory claiming that machines are the answer, like the now infamous HIT — or High Intensity Training — approach sold by Arthur Jones, inventor of the original Nautilus machines, that explained how moving quickly through an entire, complete circuit of, you guessed it, Nautilus machines, would help you reach your true potential. Meanwhile, the real reason your gym has so many strength machines is that anybody can figure out how to use them, and they make injury nearly impossible.

Commercial health clubs need about 10 times as many members as their facilities can handle, so designing them for athletes, or even aspiring athletes, makes no sense. Fitness fanatics work out too much, making every potential new member think, Nah, this place looks too crowded for me. The winning marketing strategy, according to *Recreation Management Magazine*, a health club-industry trade rag, focuses strictly on luring in the "out-of-shape public," meaning all of those people whose doctors have told them, "About 20 minutes three times a week," who won't come often if ever, and who definitely won't join unless everything looks easy, available, and safe. The entire gym, from soup to nuts, has been designed around getting suckers to sign up, and then getting them mildly, vaguely exercised every once in a long while, and then getting them out the door.

Now turn to the well-thumbed magazines in your gym's waiting area, the ones you pick up while killing time before the "complimentary personal training session" that comes with your membership. Mainstream men's fitness magazines have no larger mission than profitable advertising sales, which means endless pitches for useless (if not outright dangerous) dietary supplements and articles on "Seven Steps to Great Abs," always omitting the all-important Step Eight: In order to make your six-pack even remotely visible to the naked eye, reduce your total body fat to an inhuman 10 percent.

Next up, shake hands with that nice, buff guy in the "trainer" shirt, and confess that you really don't have a clue how to use a gym but that you're into outdoor sports and you want to stay fit enough to have fun on weekends. He'll nod a lot and pretend to take notes. Then he'll measure your body fat with some high-tech-looking device and ask you lots of questions, ultimately convincing you to hire him twice a week.

I have worked with great trainers before, but it would've been helpful to know that a personal-trainer certificate isn't much more meaningful than a beautician's license — anybody can get one without breaking a sweat or even meeting a single athlete.

But the personal-training business model doesn't include teaching (or even learning) the fundamentals anyway. Trainers make a living by keeping clients coming back; fundamentals liberate clients to train themselves. So the savvy trainer tells you that these days, it's all about "functional fitness," a complex integration of balance and stability and strength. He's taken workshops in it, he tells you, gotten a few extra certifications. Then he just makes every workout fun and varied enough that it seems like a futuristic form of voodoo. According to a *Club Industry* magazine article by one Nic DeCaire, owner of something called the Fusion Fitness Center in Newark, Delaware, most trainers teach "just enough so that the trainer remains more valuable and indispensable." The same article encourages gym owners to fire any trainer who dresses for work in workout clothes instead of slacks and a polo.

The most amazing element of this little hustle — and I'm speaking from personal experience and from regret — is that it all works like a charm.



## TRUTH 2: YOU NEED TO BREAK YOURSELF DOWN BEFORE YOU REBUILD.

Two years after I'd signed that first gym contract, I'd mastered all sorts of freak-show Cirque du Soleil balance-ball exercises. I could knock off a dozen squats while standing on a giant inflatable Swiss ball and holding 20-pound dumbbells, and the guy I saw in the mirror was a certified badass. But in reality I wasn't much more than the perfect health-club customer: a middle-aged man with a fast-fading ability to paddle a surfboard into big winter waves at San Francisco's Ocean Beach. I was getting weaker with every passing year.

My conversion moment came in a garage-like industrial space next to an ATV rental yard in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. I was lying on a concrete floor, near puking, having just humiliated myself on the king of all strength exercises, the old-school back squat. "The best thing I can do for an athlete," coach Rob Shaul said to me as I struggled to get up, "is to make him strong. Strength is king, and you're fucking little-girl weak."

**THE PERFECT EXERCISE**

**THE CLASSIC BACK SQUAT HAS IT ALL, BUT BAD FORM WILL RESULT IN A BIG INJURY.**

**1.** Place your heels a little more than shoulder width apart and turn your toes out 30 degrees.

**2.** Place the bar parallel between the base of your traps and on top of your delts, hands as close together as possible.

**3.** Balance the bar so it lines up above the middle of your arches.

**4.** Focus your eyes on a spot on the floor 5 feet in front of you; keep them on that spot through the whole squat.

**5.** Sink straight down with your upper body leaning forward at 45 degrees, pausing briefly when your hips drop just below your knees.

**6.** Don't stop at the bottom: Tighten your hip muscles, give a slight bounce, drive your hips up, and stand.

Illustration by Nicole Wilkinson

Shaul makes a living by designing strength-and-conditioning programs for Special Forces units heading to Afghanistan. He also owns [Mountain Athlete](#), a private gym in Jackson, Wyoming, where he trains pro ski racers, sponsored ice climbers, full-time international mountain guides, and Jackson locals who keep fit so they can play hard in the Tetons.

I'd come here because I'd gotten a call from an old climbing buddy, Christian Santelices. Santelices had left the Bay Area and moved to the Tetons, where he'd worked his way up to the top mountain-guiding job in the United States, co-chief guide for Jackson's [Exum Mountain Guides](#). I admitted to him that three-hour climbing-gym sessions and four-hour surfs were a thing of my past, but said I was making serious inroads on using the gym. I was inventing killer stability-ball exercises, I told him, stuff he wouldn't believe. "Funny thing," Santelices told me on the phone. "I'm in a gym a lot too. Working with this guy who specializes in training people for mountain sports. Maybe you ought to come check it out."

I jumped on a plane, slept in a motel, gulped a crappy coffee, drove down a lonely highway, and presented myself. Beneath the Mountain Athlete banners, I saw nothing but dumbbells, barbells, iron weight plates, braided climbing ropes hanging off the ceiling, pull-up bars, and dip bars. No mirrors, no TVs, no music, no elliptical trainers, no weight machines, and, to my annoyance, absolutely no rubber bands or stability balls.

That worried me. How do you get sport-specific without rubber bands and stability balls, or at least Bosu platforms? And, shoot, I'd really been hoping to show Santelices and Shaul my stability-ball dumbbell squats. They take serious core stability.

No decor either, I noticed: just a few thank-you letters from military units, a wall-mounted baby pacifier with a sign saying "Emergency Use Only," and a piece of paper with Shaul's strength standards for men (BW = your own body weight):

### LIFT

Front Squat 1.5x BW  
 Dead Lift 2.0x BW  
 Bench Press 1.5x BW

Running the numbers in my head — I weigh 205 — I was about to raise my hand. *Ahem, Coach? Yeah, I'm just wondering about your strength standards, see, because, uh, yeah. You can't be serious.*

Then Shaul started the session, calling me and a dozen others onto the floor. Shaul grew up in Wyoming, served in the Coast Guard, and spent years as a self-described gym rat, devouring every training book he could find before he opened Mountain Athlete. Shaul's gift for this work comes from his unique background as a fitness fanatic who happened to grow up in Wyoming, surrounded by elite-level mountain athletes. He has close-cropped hair, a face that always looks as if he's just been sucker-punched out of a slight drunkenness, and a military demeanor. He ordered us over to the barbell racks, telling us to work our way up to the heaviest squat we could do once. I realized that I had never done this particular test in my life. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more certain I became that I'd never even done plain old squats. Wasn't it far better to squat on a stability ball and get all that additional balance and core work?

Fifteen minutes later, I had my answer: I possessed the weakest legs in the room, bar none. As a sport-specific stability-ball superstar proudly squatting a grandma-level 40 pounds, I had developed a pair of wobbly, hide-your-head-in-shame chicken sticks, even in comparison to a couple of short middle-aged women Shaul was training for climbing and trail running. The rest of the session — more barbell moves, along with push-ups, pull-ups, and dips — revealed more of the same. I was, in a word, weak. Not even middle-aged-lady weak — little-girl weak.

But Shaul gave me a great gift that day, cluing me in to a little secret: True sport-specific training, for literally everybody except elite athletes, isn't sport-specific at all. It's about getting strong, durable, and relentless in simple, old-school ways that a man can train, test, and measure. Nobody does crunches training this way, nobody watches television from the stationary bike, and 60-year-old women dead-lift 200 pounds and more.

Shaul was the smartest man I'd met in terms of getting truly fit, but I wasn't about to move to Jackson. And I didn't want a coach, anyway; I wanted to become my own coach. And now I knew this wasn't about a gym or about gym equipment; it was about an ethos, an understanding that nothing on Earth beats the fundamentals, a commitment to regular, measurable improvement in everything that a gym trainer won't teach, for fear you'll walk away bored: push-ups, pull-ups, bench presses, squats, dead lifts, and even such military-seeming tests as just how fast you can run a single mile.



### TRUTH 3: ONCE YOU "GET IT," YOU'LL LOVE IT.

Shaul's guys out in Wyoming get massively strong and powerful on precisely three gym sessions a week, each lasting an hour and no more. Louie Simmons, the single biggest name in gorilla-style competitive power lifting, will tell you that 45 minutes is the max length of any smart training session.

But you can't spend the first 15 minutes watching CNN from the treadmill and the last 15 "warming down." Every second has to count, and it all starts with understanding the four basic muscular aptitudes: strength, power, muscle mass, and muscular endurance.

Strength means how much you can lift once, and it's the backbone of every sport on Earth, from the crouch-holding power of a skier to the one-finger pull-up of a climber. Power is a more slippery term that means "speed strength," or how much you can lift very, very quickly, and it gives you the explosive paddling speed to catch a big wave or the pedaling burst to fire your mountain bike up a grade. Muscle mass can be a liability in sports like climbing, where it's all about strength-to-weight ratio, but mass helps enormously with games like rugby and football, and it can support strength and power — not to mention make you look better in a T-shirt. Muscular endurance means how many times you can lift a given weight in a row without stopping, and it's the essence of running, swimming, and even a kayaker's long-haul paddling.

As for your training sessions themselves, the number one thing to remember is that each of the Fundamental Four responds to a different number of repetitions per set. Lift a weight so heavy you can lift it only once, you're building strength (and, oddly, not much mass); lift a weight you can move six to 12 times, you're building mass (and, oddly, a little less pure strength); ease up to a weight you can lift 50 times, and you're working muscular endurance (which is great for endurance sports but tends to undermine the first three, shrinking your strength, power, and muscle size).

## THE FORMULA FOR GETTING FIT

### ONE SIMPLE CHART COVERS EVERY APTITUDE YOU NEED

The original research done by Soviet scientists, in the state's pursuit of Olympic gold, remains the best model out there for training the four fundamental muscular aptitudes. Using their chart, you can easily program your own workouts, depending on your goals.

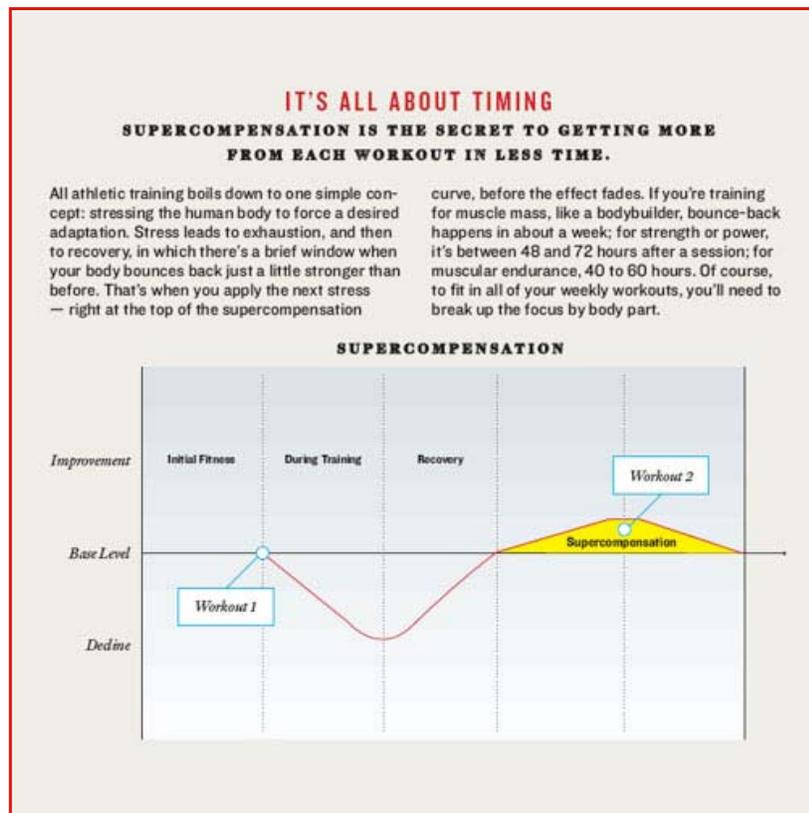
VARIABLE	TRAINING GOAL			
	STRENGTH	POWER	MUSCLE MASS	ENDURANCE
LOAD (% OF ONE-REP MAX)	80-90	70-90	60-80	40-60
REPS PER SET	1-5	1-5	6-12	15-60
SETS PER EXERCISE	4-7	3-5	4-8	2-4
REST BETWEEN SETS (MINUTES)	2-6	2-6	2-5	1-2
SPEED PER REP (% OF MAX)	60-100	90-100	60-90	60-80
MINIMUM SESSIONS PER WEEK	3	3	5	8

Down the road, if you're like me, you'll want to train multiple aptitudes at once: strength, power, and endurance. Things get complicated quickly when you're self-coaching for multiple aptitudes, and I'm convinced it makes far more sense to start with just one, stick to it, and experience a few supercompensation cycles in your own body.

Regardless of which aptitude you choose, you'll start by focusing on a few basic exercises — the squat, the dead lift, and the bench press. Those old sessions you've been doing, of eight or 10 different single-muscle exercises, that's over. Every serious strength-and-conditioning coach sticks to the basic barbell movements, because our bodies don't operate as single muscles — they operate as a whole. Even in 2010, picking up heavy things, throwing heavy things up over our heads, and pulling heavy things remain the very best ways to replicate our foundational movement patterns.

The only other thing you really need to understand is how our bodies respond to training. First: The human body adapts to stress. Throw us in ice-cold water every day and we'll sprout subcutaneous fat for insulation; expose us to the desert sun and our skin will darken. What this means for getting in shape is that each week, you have to stress your body a little more than last time — lift a little heavier, run a little harder. Muscles weaken with exhaustion after a workout, but then they recover and typically, a few days later, go into what's known as "supercompensation," a fancy word that just means bouncing back a little stronger than before. Soon afterward the muscle fades back to normal again. Work a muscle too soon after the last time you worked it, before the muscle completely recovers, and it'll get even weaker than before. If you work a muscle too late, after that supercompensation effect fades, you'll just keep returning to your baseline.

So the whole trick to athletic training — and this is true for everybody from bodybuilders to marathoners to noncompetitive athletes just in it for health, or even vanity — is timing each subsequent workout so it hits the middle of that so-called supercompensation peak, when a muscle has already bounced back even stronger than before but hasn't yet returned to baseline.



It can be hard to believe a true strength coach the first time he tells you that by pressing and dead-lifting on even days, squatting and doing chin-ups on odd days, avoiding all other exercises, and adding a little to the bar each time, you'll be stronger than you've ever been in only a month's time. Thanks to the fitness industry, we're so conditioned to equate sophistication with complexity — and to think we've got to "work each body part" — that our gut just says, No way; that can't work. But it works like magic, and the entire body hardens up in unison.

Finally, keep it simple; understand that variety is overrated. Variety does stave off boredom — it's fun to mix in new exercises all the time — but a guy who hasn't trained in a long time, if ever, will get stronger faster on the simplest program of squats, dead lifts, and presses, three times a week. It's true that you cannot do the same workout forever; you'll go stale, and then you'll go crazy, and 2010 then you'll quit. It's also true that the stronger you get, and the closer to your genetic potential, the more you have to mix in new lifts and switch up the numbers of sets and reps you're doing, just to make a little gain each week, or even each month. But I've learned the hard way that you've got to be careful about adding variety. If you constantly screw around with endless new exercises, you have no way of adding the precisely calibrated weight increases that actually make you stronger. To get it just right, keep meticulous records, writing down every rep and every lift so your targets for each workout are easy to spot and your gains are easy to measure.

This is the truest meaning of functional strength training, and coaches like Shaul throw in the Olympic "quick lifts" — the snatch, the clean-and-jerk — and simple back squats, because they force us to make those foundational movements very quickly. When you're ready to add muscular endurance, it's all about body weight: push-ups, pull-ups, chins, dips, and sit-ups.

This simple formula is 90 percent of what you need to know, and you now officially know more than the buff 25-year-old doing your gym-membership orientation.



**TRUTH 4: INSIDE EVERY MAN'S BODY IS A WEAK MUSCLE WAITING TO FAIL.**

The black pupil of Kevin Brown's right eye, blinded by the radiation beams targeting his cancerous tumor, joined his healthy eye in gazing right through me — not into my thoughts, but into all the old injuries and weaknesses I'd felt flaring up as my training got more serious. There were the sore knees, from heedless high school jogging, and the pain they now caused from doing my squats. There was that stiff shoulder, wrecked from college water polo, now buckling under heavy bench presses. And Brown seemed to see it all without even laying a hand on me.

Brown was an athletic-rehab specialist, a legendary decoder of the body's imbalances and compensations. He'd worked with everybody from Kelly Slater to Joe Montana to members of the Lakers to some of the world's finest rock climbers. He was the guy every athlete dreams of meeting, who can tell you exactly why your lower back likes to spasm, exactly which element of your exercise life is going to push it over the edge into injury, and exactly how to fix it, for good.

I'd first heard about Brown from the same guy who told me about Rob Shaul: Christian Santelices, the Tetons mountain guide. This time Santelices called to tell me his friend Kevin Brown's cancer had metastasized and that dozens of Brown's devoted clients were flying to Santa Barbara to crowd into Brown's training studio. Even Shaul was coming. Brown had never written a book, Santelices explained. He'd never made any meaningful notes, but he had a gift for building the injury-proof athlete and for reconstructing bodies badly broken on the field of play. Everybody who'd known Brown wanted to preserve that knowledge before he died.

It was quite a lineup: a three-time member of the U.S. Olympic Ski Team who'd once landed a ski jump so hard she shattered her kneecap and femur and was told she'd never walk again, a legendary California big-wave surfer who'd crushed his spine in a ghastly headfirst wipeout, a world record-setting power lifter whose quadriceps ripped off at the bottom of a deep squat. Their meetings were documented in an 18-hour DVD featuring all of these people telling, in essence, the same story again and again: how they'd always felt strong until that big accident, how every conventional doctor told them they were screwed and that it was time to buy a walker, and how this Brown guy found the secret to stitching them back together again, making their muscles work so well they rejoined elite competition.

But I didn't fully appreciate Brown's gift, nor his core insight about the athletic body, until I flew down to Santa Barbara myself and walked into the bedroom in which he was dying. As soon as he shook my hand with his long, pale fingers, Brown began decoding me, reading the very curvature of my back and the way I moved to reveal injuries I'd not thought about for 20 years, along with injuries I was guaranteed to get, soon, if something wasn't done.

"Somewhere inside every man's body," Brown told me, lying in a La-Z-Boy, "there's a weak link, a weak muscle waiting to fail. My job is to find that muscle and make it strong." Every big joint in your body, Brown explained, has what are called prime movers, meaning big muscles that govern the main action, like the biceps and triceps. But every joint also has a bunch of little stabilizer muscles. Sedentary lives, camped out in office chairs, allow those stabilizers to atrophy, raising two problems: First, if you have powerful prime movers from doing muscle-isolation machines at the gym but weak stabilizers because you rarely get to play a sport, you can't access all your strength when you, say, bang off a mogul on a ski hill. "It's like trying to fire a cannon from a canoe," Brown told me. The prime movers fire big, but the strength dissipates en route to the core. Second, and worse still, the strength of the prime movers can shred your unstable joints.

Brown talked briefly about the life list he'd ticked off in the days since learning he would soon die: a final climb of the Grand Teton on his 50th birthday, a final dawn-patrol surf. He had even taught his nine-year-old son to rock climb. He returned to the matters at hand, telling me that my weak knees and shoulder, my tight neck and spastic lumbar, were absolutely typical of a middle-aged recreational athlete with a desk job who spends all day slumped over and slack and then goes out and plays hard. Ignore this stuff, he said, and keep training, and I was guaranteed to get injuries that could set me back for a year. The good news, Brown told me, was that joint stability in each area could be traced to a remarkably small number of tiny stabilizer muscles. And while you could spend a fortune on physical therapists, trying to get them to tell you the same thing, you could also just start exercising those stabilizers. "I'm not reinventing the wheel here," Brown told me. "This is just better-mousetrap kind of stuff."

Kevin Brown died four weeks later, in November of last year.

**KEVIN BROWN'S GUIDE TO AVOIDING INJURY**  
AVOID THE MOST COMMON INJURIES — AND EVEN REHAB THEM — WITH JUST FOUR EXERCISES.

<p><b>KNEES</b> Key muscle: Gluteus medius, or the side of your butt Exercise: Side-lying leg lift Tip: Lean your whole body forward 45 degrees, and rotate your top foot so that the toes are touching the heel of your bottom foot. Benchmark: Once you can do two sets of 50 reps on each side, with a five-pound ankle weight, you're stable enough for most recreational sports.</p>	<p><b>SHOULDERS</b> Key muscle: Rotator cuff Exercise: Side-lying shoulder rotation Tip: Tuck a folded towel between your upper arm and your ribs. Benchmark: Two sets of 50 reps, each arm, with a five-pound weight</p>	<p><b>UPPER BACK AND NECK</b> Key muscles: Trapezius and spinal erectors, running alongside your thoracic vertebrae Exercise: Prone Y on a stability ball Tip: Hold a long, lightweight dowel and flex your upper back to finish the lift. Benchmark: Two sets of 50 reps with a five-pound bar</p>	<p><b>LOWER BACK</b> Key muscles: Lumbar spine, including the lower spinal erectors — those big muscles on either side of your lower spine — but also deep abdominal muscles Exercise: Plank Tip: Keep your entire body rigid, and prevent your belly from sagging by straightening out your lower back as much as possible. Benchmark: Two minutes, twice</p>
			

Illustrations by Nicole Wilkinson

#### TRUTH 5: BEING FIT IS ABOUT THE FREEDOM TO TRAIN YOURSELF FOREVER.

Little-girl weak: a man doesn't easily forget that kind of crack. So I began my own foray into self-coaching the way I always do when I'm determined to learn something: I bought a lot of books. I asked Shaul and a few other guys for their favorite titles, and I cruised Amazon.com, buying those and



anything else that looked relevant. Nobody needs to read all the crap I read, but it's worth getting your hands on the "bibles," a short selection of brilliant resources full of the precise, detailed training programs that will get anybody started.

One book in particular, Mark Rippetoe's **Starting Strength: Basic Barbell Training**, inspired me to start with the very first of the Fundamental Four: strength. I liked the clarity of the word, and I liked the idea of keeping life simple, learning one aptitude at a time. Many pros will tell you that strength is the place to start, because once you've built pure strength, you'll have no trouble adding power, size, and endurance. I decided to just follow Rippetoe's bare-bones old-school program.

**→ THE ESSENTIAL FITNESS LIBRARY**

The great Louie Simmons, owner of the most exclusive power-lifting gym in America, Westside Barbell, in Ohio, once said that the most important thing a man can do for his training is learn to read.

<p><b>IF YOU COULD OWN ONLY ONE BOOK:</b>  <b>Starting Strength: Basic Barbell Training</b>, by Mark Rippetoe and Lon Kilgore, offers a novice workout template guaranteed to get you a lot stronger in a big hurry.</p> <p><b>FOR THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE STRENGTH:</b>  <b>Science and Practice of Strength Training</b>, by Vladimir M. Zatsiorsky, is an excellent overview of strength-training theory.</p> <p><b>FOR THE INTERMEDIATE:</b>  <b>Practical Programming for Strength Training</b>, also by Mark</p>	<p>Rippetoe and Lon Kilgore, details how to program your own training, once you move beyond the novice stage.</p> <p><b>IF YOU'RE READY TO DIAL IN YOUR OLYMPIC LIFTS:</b>  <b>Olympic-Style Weightlifting</b>, by Jim Schmitz, is a solid intro to this niche style of lifting.</p> <p><b>FOR SPORT-SPECIFIC THEORY:</b>  <b>Athletic Development: The Art &amp; Science of Functional Sports Conditioning</b>, by Vern Gambetta, provides a brilliant explanation of how coaches convert pure fitness into sport-specific fitness.</p>
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The next six months turned out to be among the strangest and most liberating of my athletic life. On day one, I did like you're supposed to, starting with light loads in the squat, dead lift, and bench, doing five reps, adding weight, doing five more, and so on, until I'd reached the highest weight I could do five times. Then I quit, came back two days later, and made sure to work up to a slightly higher final weight. Week after week, and for the first time in all my years, I got steadily stronger. On a given Monday, I'd squat 135 for three sets of five; Wednesday, I'd hit 145; Friday, 155; the next Monday, 165. No drugs, no steroids, no whey-protein isolate. Before *Starting Strength*, I didn't even know what a dead lift was, but my dead lift went from 135 pounds to 335. My bench press went well over my body weight. At age 42 — 6-foot-2 and gangly and 20 years into complaining about a bad back and bum knees, and right when any doctor or physical therapist would have told me it was time to embrace the low-impact elliptical — my back squat hit 275, going below parallel. My thighs got so big I couldn't fit into most of my jeans, and I had to start shopping for new T-shirts.

I'll admit this begs a few questions, mostly about how pure strength makes anybody healthier, or helps in a given sport. There's the predictable answer about how numerous studies recommend resistance training for the maintenance of bone density and muscle mass and even for heart-health benefits equal to cardiovascular exercise, how even famous big-wave surfers have begun lifting like this, and how barbells have become de rigueur on the pro-tennis circuit. But there's an even better reason to build pure strength. I've come to believe that men don't go to gyms just to avoid heart disease or support our weekend sports. It's worth getting strong because we go to gyms in large part to maintain a little goddamned self-respect, and to blow off steam, and to insist, against all odds, that we do remain fiercely vital physical beings. And trust me, there's nothing like watching your dead lift skyrocket to make you feel vital. It's the happy exhaustion, the sense of hard work well done, with a clear purpose; it's the rush of seeing your body change, fat turning into lean mass.

Sure, you have to eat right — that's another manifesto in itself — but if you just stick to a basic strength-training program, you can expect a certain wonderment about what the hell you were doing all those years, why nobody told you it was this simple before, and why nobody else in the gym appears to have heard the good news.

If strength just doesn't appeal as a place to get started, then think about the sports you love and decide which of the Fundamental Four best suits the coming seasons. I've personally moved on to the Olympic lifts, developing explosive power. I've signed up for a trail race and a big open-water swim, too, so I'll soon transition into muscular-endurance work. After that, I suppose, comes an effort to build pure muscle mass. Down the line, I'll probably

start the more complicated business of mixing and matching, training multiple aptitudes at once.

The main thing, though, is just to get going. Who cares if you put on more muscle than you really want? Or if you suck during a few weekend soccer games because the squats are hammering your legs? You'll be on a journey, at long last, learning how to own the gym, how to make your thrice-weekly health-club sessions into a confident, focused process invulnerable to bullshit. You'll begin walking right past all the muscle-isolation weight machines, feeling a little sorry for all the guys who still think those are a good use of their time. You'll start heading right back to the barbells instead, back in the gym's darkest distant corner, and seeing them only as tools for your own ends, your own sports and goals. Once that happens, you're on your way. You'll certainly never need another article like this one.

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