

Zen Mind, Strong Body



**How To Cultivate
Advanced Calisthenic Strength—
Using The Power of “Beginner’s Mind”**

BY AL KAVADLO

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*“If your mind is empty,
it is ready for anything,
it is open to everything.*

*In the beginner’s mind
there are many possibilities,
but in the expert’s mind
there are few.”*

—Shunryu Suzuki



Al and Mike at Tompkins Square park circa 2011.

FOREWORD

By Mike Fitch

Al and I walked the sidewalks that zig-zag around the legendary Tompkins Square Park, just before stopping for some impromptu handstand practice at a wide slab of open concrete tucked away in the corner. We were talking about the progressions from bent-arm press-ups to the impressive straight-arm variations when we heard a voice from behind us.

“Man! I have to take a picture of this! Here I am walking through the park and I spot you guys just hanging out, talking shop. Can I take a picture of the two of you?”

Al and I simultaneously glanced over our shoulders expecting to see someone famous standing behind us, as if to silently suggest what we were both thinking: “What the hell do you want a picture of us for?”

Once we realized the voice we heard was in fact directed at us, we happily agreed and took our photo ready stances; Al flashed his trademark grin and thumbs up. We talked calisthenics with the gentleman for a bit before he went on his way. Shortly after he had walked outside of earshot Al looked at me and said, “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that.”

It was that quick sentiment that sums up the way that I think about Al Kavadlo. He’s humble, he’s appreciative and he does what he does because there’s no way he could NOT do it. There’s a reason so many people follow and look up to him. He’s clearly doing what he’s passionate about and that feeling is contagious.

I credit Al with teaching me an important lesson during our first interaction years ago. I had just launched Global Bodyweight Training, and as the new kid on the block I was jumping in to comment on other blogs. I stumbled across a post about training the Single-Arm Pull-Up by Al Kavadlo. The article was great, but I was on my own mission. I wrote a very long and detailed comment on the post describing how I would train it completely different. Al’s wise response is something I still fall back on to this day. His simple words basically translated to, “Thanks for the comment, Mike, but there’s more than one way to skin a cat.”



Mike Fitch hanging out with the Kavadlo brothers in 2014.

We later discussed the art of neutralizing comments on blog threads. There will always be people who want to challenge you, or say you suck. You then have a choice on how to respond. You can either continue the argument, trying to convince them that you are right, or you can refuse to pour gas on the situation and instead neutralize it with kindness.

This is just one of the many reasons I believe Al embodies the symbol of the yin and yang. The classic black and white symbol represents a philosophy where apparently opposite or contrary forces are actually complementary. He's the tattooed guy who has a heart of gold. He loves metal music and yogic stretching. He maintains a huge following but has no ego.

But that's the energy Al exudes. It's about the balanced approach to fitness, health and well being. You can't have one without the other. His books give insight into finding that balance between training and regeneration; push and pull; strict adherence while simultaneously bending the rules. In true Al fashion, he lays a convincing argument for the information while still empowering the reader to make their own decisions.

This book presents a collection of the articles that best represent Al's pitch-perfect coaching voice. Some are heavy hitters like the popular Clean Up Your Muscle-up. Others are fun to jam to, like I Love Peanut Butter, where Al breaks down the health benefits of one of his favorite foods. I myself am going to go re-read one of my favorites, Calisthenics and Body Awareness. I'm sure you'll find your own favorites, too!

Enjoy!

Mike Fitch



INTRODUCTION

By Al Kavadlo

Not very long ago I found myself in a bit of a crisis. I had just turned 30 years old and I wasn't happy with where my life was headed. After spending most of my twenties employed as a personal trainer in a corporate health club, I felt frustrated by mainstream fitness marketers who were giving the masses a false impression of what exercise and health were all about. All the emphasis was on quick fixes and shortcuts. It felt like everyone was spewing bullshit in order to sell gym memberships and dietary supplements to folks too gullible to know better. Was anybody in mainstream fitness telling the truth anymore?

Additionally, with so many marketers trying to make fitness into a chore in order to sell a shortcut, the idea that working out could be fun was becoming a forgotten concept. I still can't believe how many people prefer to use iPods and TVs to distract themselves through the entire workout process rather than being present and actually trying to enjoy it.

After a conversation about how I should "be the change I wanted to see" in the fitness world, my lifelong friend Mike Lieberman gave me a suggestion that would forever change my life. "You should start a blog," Mike told me. "And a YouTube channel."

Like most people who receive good advice, I was resistant to Mike's suggestion. It sounded like a lot of work and I considered myself to be plenty busy already. Besides, I wanted to write books and lead workshops, not have a blog!

The year was 2009. The internet was already ubiquitous, yet I couldn't conceive that being a blogger could be a viable career. In retrospect, I suppose I felt the same about being a trainer before I got into that, too.

I eventually came to follow Mike's advice and soon learned to embrace the blogging process. Over the next few years I wrote hundreds of blog posts and produced countless YouTube shorts. I've always enjoyed writing and I liked the idea of finally putting my English degree to use. Besides, I'd already been videoing my workouts for my own observations, so it didn't take much effort to start sharing them.

Once I immersed myself in the process and focused on getting my message out there by whatever means I could, everything else began falling into place. In the last 6 years, I've written 4 full-length books (well, 5 including this one), appeared in several other books, and authored hundreds of articles for various magazines and websites. I've also traveled all over the world with my brother Danny, teaching Progressive Calisthenics to trainers, enthusiasts and aficionados.



Additionally, since the inception of the Progressive Calisthenics Certification, I've taken on the role of editor-in-chief for the PCC blog. Every post that goes on that blog has to be approved (and in most cases edited) by me. Plus I've written quite a few posts for the blog myself!

Part of what makes the electronic age so amazing is the speed and convenience with which we can communicate. The unfortunate flipside, however, is that because there is so much information out there, it's easy for things to get lost in the shuffle. The web is so ethereal—that's part of why blogging seemed unappealing to me in the beginning.

My solution to that problem is this collection in front of you right now. These are 26 of my favorite articles that I have ever written, organized in one place. I've made a few small changes (some posts got new titles, some got a new paragraph or two) but for the most part this is the way that I first wrote everything. (I updated a bunch of the photos, too. It looks much better now—I was using a pretty crappy camera in the early days!)



Some of these selections are long, some of them are short. All of them are straight from the heart. Read them, enjoy them, learn from them. Have fun with it.

We're Working Out!

Al Cavallo



Fosco

HYLETE



PART I

ZEN MIND

*“Absorb what is useful,
discard what is useless,
and add what is
uniquely your own.”*

—Bruce Lee



1 - ZEN MIND/CALISTHENICS MIND

Throughout my life, I've experimented with dozens of different exercise modalities.

I've used barbells, dumbbells, kettlebells, medicine balls, sandbags, and just about every other heavy object I could think of to try lifting.

I've done parkour, martial arts, marathons and yoga. I even tried a triathlon.

I believe my various experiences have helped me become a more well-rounded physical specimen, but after all of those things, I always come back to the simplest, most direct way of training I've ever known—calisthenics.



I love calisthenics training because it requires nothing more than your body, your mind and your warrior spirit. You don't need to buy anything, go anywhere or put on any special clothing. Anybody can start right now. As Maya Angelou once said, "Ain't nothing to it but to do it." (Or was that Ronnie Coleman?)

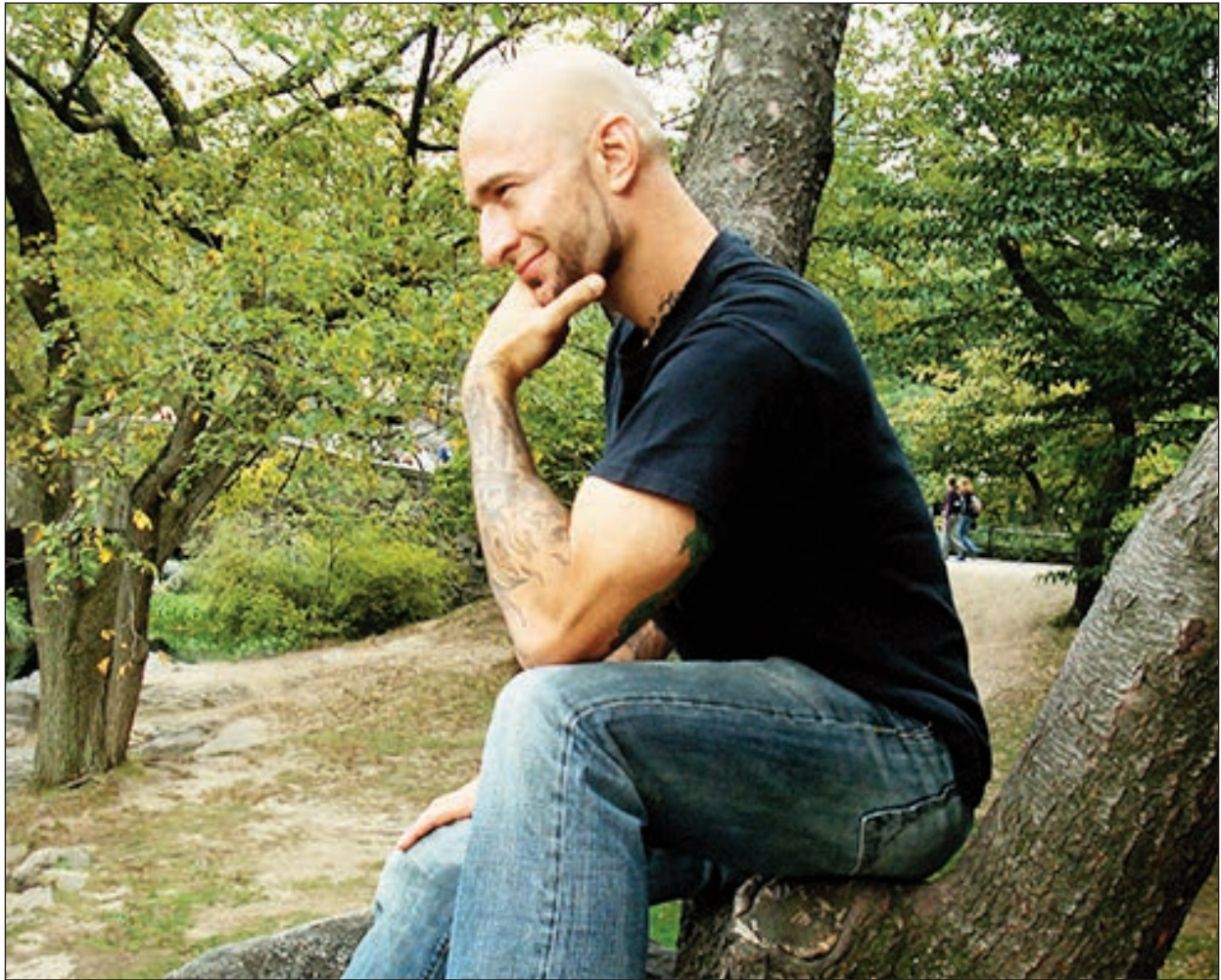
There's a lot to love about calisthenics, but my favorite thing is how it keeps you in the present. When you're working on developing a new skill, you need to give all of your attention to the task at hand. When you are completely focused on your training, the division between body and mind breaks down and everything else seems to fall away. This is what I'm referring to when I talk about Zen mind.

Over the years, I've learned and absorbed many things from different places, taken what's worked for me, and used it all to develop my own theories and methods, which continue to adapt and take shape before my eyes. I'm constantly working to refine and expand my movement repertoire. I'm always looking for inspiration in new and varied places.

I owe a thank-you to anyone I've ever trained, trained with, worked with, worked-out with or known in any capacity whatsoever. Some people have obviously had a greater impact than others, but everyone I've ever interacted with (even electronically!) has in some way shaped who I am today—and I'm grateful for every bit of it. I'm hoping I can return some of that inspiration, in some small way, to anyone who's reading this.



2 - SIFTING THROUGH THE MADNESS



Grains are heart-healthy, grains are toxic; free weights are the best way to strength train, free weights lead to injuries; red meat is an excellent source of protein, red meat will give you cancer; cardio workouts are good for your heart, chronic cardio will leave you weak and tired; red wine is good for you, drinking alcohol destroys your liver; tuna is a great source of omega-3's, tuna causes mercury poisoning.

With so much conflicting information out there, how is one to know what to believe?

Whether we're aware of it or not, we all have a belief system by which we judge new information. Our foundational beliefs shape our opinions about everything we encounter in the world.

My belief system is based primarily on three things: **experience**, **logic**, and **intuition**.

EXPERIENCE

One of my favorite Buddhist quotes says, “Believe nothing, no matter where you read it, or who has said it, no matter if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own experience.” I believe this to be some of the best advice ever given. There is nothing that I trust more than my own reason and firsthand experience—and there is nothing you should trust more than yours. I’m amazed by how often I see people disregard their own firsthand experience because it doesn’t agree with something they heard or read.

LOGIC

If something comes up that I don’t have firsthand experience with, utilizing logic becomes the best course of action. That just means I ask myself, does this make sense? If it doesn’t make sense, there may be something that I’m overlooking, or it may simply be bullshit. That’s where intuition comes in.

INTUITION

Experience means relying on your five senses; in a way, intuition is our sixth sense. Trusting your intuition means believing in yourself.

If I need to make a decision about something that I have no prior experience with and I can’t come to a logical conclusion, intuition is all I have left to go on, so I’ll do what my instincts tell me. If my instincts wind up being wrong, at least I’ll have some experience to go on the next time I’m presented with similar circumstances.



Getting up on my high horse

QUESTION EVERYTHING!

There are countless “experts” out there who claim that their method is the best or the only way to achieve success. The more sure someone seems that their own beliefs are the only true path, the more I’m inclined to question them. I always try to challenge my own closest held beliefs as well—that’s actually how I came to my decision to stop taking exercise supplements (more on that later on).

Whenever someone is trying to sell you something, their motivation is suspect. That's not to say that there aren't honest salespeople out there, but they are few and far between. Other times, we as customers are so desperate for a solution to our woes that we will abandon our common sense and buy into an idea that we know is too good to really be true. Don't let your emotions override your sense of reason when making important decisions.

Many people base their actions on shaky foundational beliefs, instead of their own experience, logic and intuition. Three of the most common are **dogma**, **faith** and **science**.

DOGMA

While the term is often used in religious contexts, dogma pops up everywhere from political ideologies, to science (we'll get to that in a minute), and even in the world of health and fitness.

Don't assume that just because the experts agree on a given concept or practice that it must be right for you. Following dogmatic principles can often mean the opposite of trusting your own experience and that can get you into trouble. Anyone who disregards their real life experience because it conflicts with "the way things are supposed to be" is making a huge mistake.

FAITH

If intuition is the belief that our instincts will lead us to make good choices, faith is the opposite of that. It's a subtle distinction, but as instinct implies that we trust in ourselves to find the answers, faith means believing that something outside of yourself will guide you in the right direction. Some people believe in destiny; I'm more interested in manifesting my own.

SCIENCE

Science isn't always an exact science and controlled experiments aren't real life. When things happen in the real world, there are a lot of factors involved. The more factors involved, the more difficult it becomes to determine causality. The chasm between theory and practice makes most studies about diet, exercise or pretty much anything else irrelevant. Secondhand knowledge will always be inferior to one's own practical experience. Don't get me wrong, science has done a lot of good for the world, but the foundation of true science has always been about questioning things.

Furthermore, just like you have to question a salesperson based on their motivation, you must further question "science" when it comes from a sponsor who's invested in a particular outcome. Even "unbiased" or "double-blind" studies can be unknowingly influenced by those involved in the experiment, and test subjects may not be accurately reporting data in the first place.

DON'T TAKE MY WORD FOR IT

This is not a call to action to adopt my belief system, but rather an urging to question your own beliefs (and mine). When faced with information that doesn't mesh with your own experience, logic or intuition, proceed with caution.

3 - MAKE YOUR OWN WORKOUT



Every day I hear from people who've read my books and want to thank me for writing them; these messages mean the world to me. The driving force behind my writing is to connect with like-minded people with whom I can share my experience.

While most of the folks who write me do so to tell me how my guidance has helped them achieve new levels of strength, improve their body composition, or even take out a new lease on life, I also get messages with suggestions and criticisms. The most common complaint I've received regarding my books is from people who are disappointed that I haven't provided more detailed structure on how to progress through the various exercises presented therein.

This is understandable. After all, between *Raising The Bar* and *Pushing The Limits!*, I've given you over two hundred different exercise variations for various goals and fitness levels, yet only a handful of sample routines.

However, this is neither an accident nor oversight; it's a purposeful decision. While many fitness guides spoon-feed the reader with rigid specific regimens to follow, I've chosen to empower my followers by leaving the suggested program design open-ended.



My readers include folks of all ages, genders and athletic backgrounds. Each one starting off at a different place with individual strengths, weaknesses, goals and levels of commitment. The number of variables makes the amount of possibilities endless.

All of these people can get stronger with the same fundamental movement patterns, but each will do so at their own pace. I can't predict exactly how everyone will progress. Trying to box all potential trainees into a one-size-fits all program will inevitably leave some folks progressing too slowly, while rushing others through the paces at a rate that is inappropriate for them.

Additionally, there are a myriad of unpredictable factors that can affect your workout on any given day: what you've eaten recently, the amount of sleep you've had, stress levels—even the weather. When I train clients in person, I come into the session with an idea of what I am going to

I can do a lot for my trainees,
but I can't see into the future!



do with them, but I always wind up making changes and improvising based on what is actually happening in front of me. I can do a lot for my trainees, but I can't see into the future!

A workout regimen on paper is a good idea, but it's still just an idea. You have to put your plan into action to get any benefits. And once you start doing that, it might not go exactly as predicted; you are inevitably going to need to make modifications. In theory, theory and practice are the same. In practice, they couldn't be more different.

Obviously people need some guidance and books are a wonderful resource. However, ignoring your body's signals in favor of following a preconceived formula written by a stranger is taking a good idea too far. This is what I love about progressive calisthenics; in PCC, we teach pliable bodyweight progressions and exercise chains, not strict protocols and formulas.

Building your body isn't the same as assembling that bookshelf you bought from Ikea. We aren't all starting with the same pieces and we aren't all building the same identical object. You really need to get to know your body for yourself in order for any fitness program to work.

In fact, it's not actually the program that works at all—it's you. Now let's go get those reps!



4 - IT'S NOT GYMNASTICS



When people see me performing bodyweight feats of strength like freestanding handstand push-ups or the front lever, they often ask a familiar question:

“Are you a gymnast?”

I don’t blame them for the misunderstanding—gymnastics is the only context most people have for what they’ve witnessed. However, there is so much more to the world of bodyweight training than gymnastics!

Though I’ve never been one to dwell too heavily on labels, what I do is not gymnastics. I specialize in Progressive Calisthenics. To the casual observer, this may seem like a minor distinction. Allow me to elaborate.

Gymnastics is a highly-specific, competitive sport involving strict rules and guidelines. Progressive Calisthenics is an open-ended, individualized fitness modality centered around the concept that one's own body weight (and the proper manipulation of leverage) can provide ample resistance for strength training, regardless of one's current fitness level.



Of course the two things do have something major in common: Both can get you in the best shape of your life without the need for weights or very much equipment.

The mindset is probably the biggest difference: I train to be strong, robust and healthy. I train to make day-to-day physical tasks easier. I train for enjoyment. Gymnasts train to win—oftentimes at the expense of their health and fitness.

Competitive athletics are funny like that. Professional athletes are the fittest people in the world, but they are frequently forced to train through injuries. Many wind up pushing their bodies beyond what they can safely handle. The irony is that these people may get to be the best in the world for a brief, shining moment, but will often suffer for it later. The higher the high, the lower the low.

I prefer to take the middle ground. If I feel pain, I back off. If I need rest, I take it. By using this approach, I've managed to avoid any serious injuries or major setbacks in my training, despite over twenty years of strength work.

I have tremendous respect for the sport of gymnastics. Pro gymnasts are some of the strongest people on the planet. Their tenacity and dedication to their sport is second to none. My most impressive moves like muscle-ups and back levers are considered entry-level skills in gymnastics the same way that push-ups and squats are entry level moves in calisthenics training. A pro gymnast's warm-up is more grueling than some of my workouts.

These athletes provide inspiration and motivate me to continually challenge myself, but I have no interest in being a gymnast. I train for fun and function. My only competition is within myself. The joy of movement matters more to me than whether or not my toes are perfectly pointed.

Progressive Calisthenics and gymnastics are two different things, each with their own set of pros and cons. If you want to learn the sport of gymnastics, there are people way more qualified to teach it to you than I am.

PCC is for exercise enthusiasts and fitness professionals who want to utilize bodyweight training to get stronger, feel better and move more freely. At PCC, we focus on how to progress and regress universal movement patterns for everyday people. We encourage fun over formality; presence over perfection.

Regardless of what you choose to call it, bodyweight strength training offers something for everyone. Whether you do gymnastics, calisthenics or any other bodyweight-strength modality, we are all more alike than we are different, and we all share one thing in common: The need to challenge ourselves and test our physical potential.

With the right amount of effort, it's amazing what the human body can achieve.







5 - NO YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

I'm not making any New Year's resolutions this year and you shouldn't either. No, we're not already perfect; my issue is that New Year's resolutions simply don't work.

Most resolutions fall into one of two categories, they're either overly vague (I'm going to get fit in 2011!) or unrealistically rigid (I'm cutting out all grains and simple sugars for 2015!). These types of resolutions are problematic because they don't hold you accountable and/or they set you up to fail.

Even "better" resolutions (I'm going to exercise at least three times a week next year!) are still useless. Why? Because the calendar is just something WE MADE UP.

We made it up so we can know to meet at a certain time on a certain day and keep track of history to the best of our abilities (and it's very helpful for those things) but it's not real. Days and months and years are based on the actual cycle of the planets and stars, yes, but we made up the details.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Every day is just a day, but it's also a new opportunity, regardless of whether it's January 1st or December 27th. It doesn't make a difference when you start making changes in your life. Your body reacts to the signals you give it every single day, so stop waiting for things to fall into place and start taking action today.

For those of you who may be new to fitness, remember to ease in slowly and be patient. Those of us working out every day and/or following healthy eating plans didn't make drastic changes overnight.

Setting idealistic (unrealistic) goals is a waste of time. Focus on the process and take it step by step instead of looking ahead an entire year. The next 365 days will likely go by even quicker than the last, but if you set your sights on taking it one day at a time, you may be surprised by what the future brings.

Train hard and enjoy the ride!



6 - IT'S ALL IN YOUR MIND

You can have anything you want. It's all in your mind.

Exercise is the most clear-cut example of how we can use our minds to manifest the reality of our choosing. Fitness starts with a mental decision to make a change, then it's simply a matter of taking action. Once you start a consistent workout routine, your body starts to change right before your eyes.

If you have the mental focus to be in tune with your body, and you practice using that body, you can actually affect physical change in yourself. That's right—you can literally change the material world with your mind!

How cool is that? Really think about it.

The truly amazing thing is, everything else in life is pretty much the same way. Anything that you give your full mental focus to can be yours. That doesn't mean it's going to come easy, but if you want it badly enough, and you take the necessary steps towards that path, things that may have seemed impossible can become possible!

There were many challenges I once deemed out of my reach, but have since overcome; muscle-ups, human flags and one arm chin-ups were all exercises that once intimidated me. When I doubted my ability to perform these feats, I shut myself off from my potential. Once I realized that, however, I began to adjust my beliefs and start taking action to manifest my dreams. With practice and discipline I have since trained my body to do those feats and many others. And you can, too!

Want a better body? It's yours for the taking.

7 - THE SPECIFICITY PRINCIPLE

Most of the fitness questions that I get asked start off with the same six words, “How do I get better at...”

The answer is always the same no matter what comes next.

“Practice.”

The specificity principle is a fancy way of referring to the simple fact that you get better at the specific tasks that you consistently practice. Whether it’s handstands or pistol squats or running, to improve your skills on anything, I recommend the direct approach.

For athletes, this means that much of their training time must be devoted to their specific discipline. The little bit of supplemental training they do usually consists of things like squats and power cleans to maximize their strength and explosive power. After all, the combination of skill and strength is what leads to success in most sports.

For the rest of us, however, the specificity principle means that once we can establish a baseline of strength through basic exercises like squats, pull-ups, push-ups, etc, we can elect to devote our workout time towards whatever we like.



While skill enhancement isn't the best means towards weight loss, finding new challenges helps keep your workouts fresh while allowing you to build up a skillset that can make you stronger and more functionally fit across different modalities.

Whether it be a sport, a race or just a good old fashioned pull-up contest, pick whatever interests you and devote your fitness time towards that task.

The goals themselves aren't really important, but working towards something specific might help you stay focused. After all, goals are just a fantasy; the training that you do today is real.





My Last's Journey

Bel

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8 - MY PATH TO THE PCC

My first real job as a personal trainer was working for the Lakeshore Athletic Club in Downtown Chicago. Though I already had a couple independent clients, I was hired at the former Wabash St. location in the heart of Chicago's business district ("The Loop" as it's known to Chicagoans) as a "fitness floor manager" before working my way up to being part of the training staff.

Being a floor manager is a much less important job than it's made to sound. My main duties were picking up towels, re-racking dumbbells and making sure people didn't exceed the 30 minute cardio machine time limit during peak hours. After a few months of that (I'd already had my personal trainer certification for a while by this point), I was finally deemed ready to train clients—I'd hit the big time! I was excited but also very nervous. Being someone's trainer is a big responsibility and I wanted to do a good job.

Chicago is pretty cold and I started working at Lakeshore during the winter, so when they hired me they only gave me long sleeve shirts. Nobody saw my tattoos, which I quickly decided was a good thing. I wanted to attract as many clients as possible and I thought my ink might freak people out. I didn't have any tattoos on my hands and neck yet, so it was fairly easy to keep them all covered.

During my teens, a lot of people tried to make me feel foolish for getting my arms tattooed while I was so young. At the time, I didn't give a damn what anyone thought, but by my twenties, I started to buy into the mindset that being tattooed might be a hinderance in my professional life.



Al Kavadlo

Al holds personal trainer certifications from the American Council on Exercise (ACE) and the National Personal Training Institute (NPTI). In addition to his personal trainer certifications, Al also holds a BA in English from Binghamton University in Binghamton, NY. He believes that it is essential to stay abreast of the latest developments in the fitness industry in order to provide the best service to his clients. Al has been heard to remark, "A good trainer must be as much a student as a teacher." In keeping with that philosophy, he is looking forward to earning additional certifications in the years to come. Whether you want to gain muscle, lose fat, increase flexibility, or just improve your overall level of fitness and health, Al possesses the skills and the knowledge to help you reach your goals. Al is a great trainer for people from any fitness background, from the beginner to the experienced athlete and he always welcomes new clients.

In general, I was pretty insecure during my early adulthood. In fact, I was so unsure of myself when I began my career as a trainer that I remember being genuinely surprised the first couple of times I closed deals. I wondered if my time was really worth the money. Almost every new trainer questions themselves at some point and it's not necessarily a bad thing. I think it shows that you really care.

Though it took some time to get the ball rolling, after a few months, I started to feel more comfortable and confident in my role as a personal trainer. Things were going great; I was spending lots of time in the gym getting to know everyone and I was beginning to learn the business. I started to pick up more clients and earn the respect of my fellow trainers. I was also learning a ton about working out!

Since it was so cold, it was no big deal to wear long sleeves every day. I probably would have wanted to anyway. Even in the summer, they always had the air conditioners pumping, so nobody thought much of it. The only time I ever had my tats exposed was for a quick second in the locker room, though I generally made it a point to try to avoid others while I was changing.

After I had been there for about a year, my training manager approached me one day and told me one of his clients said something to him about the trainer with all the tattoos. He was confused and told the client he didn't have any tattooed trainers on staff. Eventually he figured out he'd never seen me in anything but long sleeves. The cat was out of the bag! He asked to see my arms and I sheepishly rolled up my sleeves. Then he told me he thought my tattoos were pretty cool and said I shouldn't feel the need to keep them covered.

What a relief it was to find out that nobody actually cared! In fact, a lot of folks at the gym really dug my ink. Like many people, I was afraid of being misunderstood, so I shielded my true self from the world. Funny enough, it was only after I embraced who I am that I started to really enjoy going to work and feeling comfortable in my role as a trainer—and a man.

Not only did I feel at ease wearing short sleeves after that conversation, I also began to feel more comfortable just being myself. I started having more fun with my clients by making jokes, telling stories and generally letting them get to know me more as a person. I came to find that this is a fundamental part of successful personal training.

When I moved back home to New York City and started working for New York Health and Racquet Club, I was pleasantly surprised to see that there were lots of other heavily tattooed trainers working for that company. The guy who hired me at NYHRC had even more ink than I did! My newfound confidence allowed me to become fairly busy within my first several months there. Though New York is a much more competitive market than Chicago, I eventually stepped up my game and within a few years became not only the top trainer in my club, but eventually the top trainer in the company. In December of 2008, I set a NYHRC company record for gross personal training sales by a single trainer in a single month. I celebrated the occasion by getting the tattoo I have on my right hand index finger.



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Bang! I had truly arrived!

Though things were going great, I soon started to feel like there was no way for me to grow within the confines of a commercial gym. There was so much about the mainstream fitness scene that I wanted to get away from. The unrealistic expectations, the “miracle” breakthroughs, the so-called “quick fixes”—not to mention all the emphasis on machines! Plus there were the usual frustrations of corporate bureaucracy with which to contend.

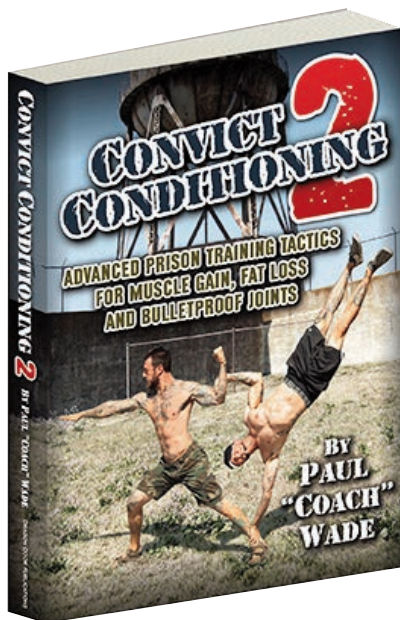
Where I had once wanted to fit in, I now wanted to stand out. I decided that I needed to do things on my own terms. I had so many ideas that seemed in contrast to what everyone else was doing. I knew there had to be more people who felt like me.

That need to connect with like-minded people was the motivation to start my blog. Soon after that, I quit my job at NYHRC to focus full time on writing. Since I wasn’t making any money writing yet, I started training a few clients at the park and working part-time at a small, independent facility called Nimble Fitness. Everyone thought I was crazy, but I knew there was no way for me to grow without starting over.

I slowly began building a following online and a reputation in the neighborhood. I focused on writing as much as I could and getting my articles and pictures in other websites and magazines. After being rejected by countless book agents and publishers, I self-published my first book, *We’re Working Out!—A Zen Approach to Everyday Fitness* in 2010. During the next year, I wrote almost a hundred articles and created nearly as many YouTube videos. I also managed to sell close to 1,000 copies of my book—a pretty big success by self-publishing standards.

One day I got an email from Paul “Coach” Wade telling me he’d read my book and loved it. What a huge compliment! I would have been quite content if he had stopped there, but of course, that was just the beginning.

My writing wasn’t the only thing that Coach Wade liked. He also liked my look—especially the tattoos. Then he told me about a new book he was working on. It was the sequel to a book called *Convict Conditioning*, which I had of course, heard a lot about. To my amazement, Coach wanted me and my brother Danny to appear in *Convict Conditioning 2*. Ironically, the tattoos that I was once concerned would limit my career opportunities wound up providing the exact opposite effect.



Appearing in *Convict Conditioning 2* was the beginning of a whole new life for me. Over the next several months, I went from being a relatively unknown fitness blogger to one of the most recognizable faces in the calisthenics community. Instead of getting a few hundred views a day, my website soon began receiving thousands of daily visits. My YouTube views quickly climbed into the millions and I started getting a dozen or more Facebook friend requests every day.

When John Du Cane and Paul Wade asked me about leading the PCC program, I jumped at the opportunity. Though being a writer and blogger has opened doors for me, actually training people is still where my deepest passion lies. Books and DVD's are great, but there is no substitute for an in-person experience. I am thrilled to be able to take the show on the road and train with you guys in the flesh!



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PART II

STRONG BODY

*“On with the dance!
Let joy be unconfined!”*

—Mark Twain



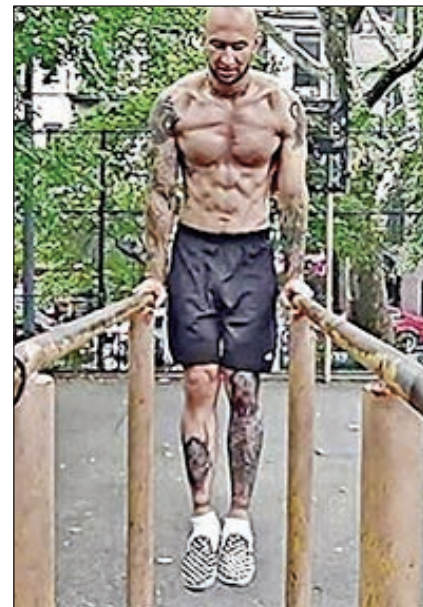
1 - STRENGTH WITHOUT MASS

I've been getting at least one of these almost every single day for a while now. In the beginning they were annoying, but after the first few times I actually started to get a kick out of them. I even came to find them flattering. After all, the people who send them are generally well intentioned and often don't realize they are being rude. Some of them are actually very polite. I'm talking, of course, about emails like this one:



If I had seen the me of today when I was a teen, I probably would have wondered the same thing. After all, the main reason I got into strength training was because I was a scrawny kid who wanted to build some muscle. Fourteen-year-old Al would be very disappointed that after 20+ years of working out I still wasn't as massive as the Incredible Hulk.

In fact, even though I'm about 30 pounds heavier now than I was at age fourteen (in spite of not growing an inch taller since then), I'm still a fairly small guy. And though my bodyfat percentage sits comfortably in the 8-12% range (I tend to naturally lean out in the summer), at a height of 5'11", I'm incredibly small by bodybuilding standards. Good thing I'm not interested in becoming a bodybuilder!



As a kid, however, I desperately wanted to bulk up. Though I managed to beef up to 190 pounds by my early twenties, I eventually came to find that I felt and performed better when I wasn't carrying so much mass. Though bulky muscle-men seemed ubiquitous to me in my youth, as an adult I soon discovered that to people who weren't fans of pro wrestling and Arnold movies (which, shockingly, is most people), being overly bulky is a turn-off. It took me a long time to change my perspective, but I've since learned to embrace my physique and take advantage of its benefits.

Though there are a few notable exceptions, most advanced bodyweight practitioners tend not to have huge, imposing physiques. Instead, high level calisthenics athletes usually have more of a lean, athletic build. After all, if pound-for-pound strength is the goal, it helps to be relatively light. The higher your muscle to weight ratio, the better off you're going to be in regard to bodyweight training. Though you definitely need some muscle mass to achieve high levels of strength, it's more pragmatic to make a little muscle go a long way. At a certain point having too much mass becomes cumbersome. It weighs you down more than it helps.

Regardless of whether your aim is to add muscle mass or simply get strong, the first thing you need to do when you begin training calisthenics is build a solid foundation. Though everyone starts at a different place, building to at least 40 bodyweight squats, 30 push-ups, 20 hanging knee raises and 10 pull-ups (those numbers might look familiar to anyone who's taken the PCC Century test) is a prerequisite that should be achievable within a few months (or a few years, depending on where you're starting). Once you've established that baseline of fitness, you'll have likely built a bit of strength, stamina and muscle along the way. If you aren't looking to grow your muscles past this point, however, it's time to start training more advanced exercises and leave the high reps to your warm-ups.



Women should aim for the same numbers, but with knee push-ups and Australian pull-ups in place of the full ones. This is not an issue of sexism. Biologically, women have a lower propensity for upper-body strength as compared to men. Of course with proper training, women have the potential to develop serious upper-body strength!

SKILL OUT

It is often said that strength is a skill, and like any skill, the way that you get better is consistent practice. The goal of a strength workout is not to focus on the *quantity* of reps, but instead the *quality*. I recommend sticking with sets of 3-5 reps. However, it is helpful to add additional sets to offset the low rep range and allow for adequate volume. For this reason, I suggest performing 3-5 sets of each movement in a given workout when strength is the primary goal. Remember, you don't need to do the same amount of volume as you would in a hypertrophy workout. The most you'll probably ever need to do of a single exercise is 25 reps per workout. We're not necessarily looking to get a pump, either. In fact, you'll want to take longer breaks in between sets when you're doing pure strength work than when the goal is mass-building. I recommend anywhere between 2-5 minutes of rest between sets.

It's important to understand that strength is as much neurological as it is physical. Whenever you try to get your body to do something that it isn't used to doing, it has to build a new neurological pathway to make it happen. Even when you ask your body to perform a familiar movement pattern, it will have a hard time if the leverage has been made less favorable than what it's become accustomed to. Your brain has never had to send that specific message to your muscle before, so it must work very hard in order to arrive there. The message often comes in fuzzy.



Imagine using a machete to chop your way through the thick vines of a jungle. This is how hard your brain must work to get your body to do something for the first time. Now imagine you've lived in that jungle for ten years and walked the same few routes over and over, gradually clearing away the brush little by little. Eventually the path would be easy to walk and you'd arrive on the other side much more quickly, and with much less effort.

The same thing happens in your brain with consistent training. Over time, the pathway becomes clearer and the message arrives faster. The body adapts to whatever stimuli it is consistently exposed to. A body that is regularly called upon to apply force against resistance will get better at doing so.

LEAN MACHINE

Diet may be the single biggest factor that determines whether or not you will increase or decrease in size. If you want to grow, you've got to eat a lot. Conversely, if you're not interested in gaining weight, you shouldn't be overeating. Though nutrition is a bit more complex than a simple calories-in minus calories-out equation, nobody ever gained significant bulk without the calories to back it up. Conversely, you can't lose fat without being in a caloric deficit.

Personally, I follow a very simple diet: I eat when I am hungry and stop when I am full. I avoid mindless snacking and stay away from processed foods. I'm not trying to gain mass, but I'm not trying to lose it either. People love to ask me how many grams of protein I consume each day or how I time my carbohydrate intake, but the truth is I don't concern myself with such trivialities. There is no need for the average person to possess a profound knowledge of nutrition in order to have a lean, strong physique. One need not understand how free radicals and antioxidants work in order to know that eating blueberries is healthy.

Regardless of your ambitions, the most important thing is being consistent with your training.



Focus on making regular exercise a part of your lifestyle. Don't over-analyze the details, especially if you aren't doing the work physically. Of course if nutritional science is of genuine interest to you, there's no reason to ignore that yearning.

Just don't make your life any more complicated than it has to be. When all is said and done, the most important thing is to respect and appreciate the body you have. It's great to strive for physical perfection, but the journey matters more than the destination.



ZEN MIND, STRONG BODY



2 - CALISTHENICS AND BODY AWARENESS

There is a lot to love about calisthenics and bodyweight training—besides being fun and cost-effective, zero equipment workouts are also convenient for travel.

My favorite aspect of bodyweight training, however, is how it teaches you to become aware of the subtle nuances of movement. Using machines instead of your bodyweight neglects this key aspect of fitness. (Don't get me started on people who read magazines or watch television during their "workout.")

I am continually amazed at how out of touch the average person is with their body. For example, when I ask a new client to try moving their shoulder blades without moving their arms, they usually cannot find the coordination to make it happen. However, these types of subtle movements can be the difference between learning to do a pull-up correctly and injuring yourself.

Proprioception refers to the sensory ability to feel different parts of the body moving through space in relation to each other. I almost always do some yoga with my strength training clients to help with their proprioceptive capabilities. Only once somebody truly learns to feel how their body moves, can they make significant gains in strength.

Clearly I'm not a fan of exercise machines, especially when compared to bodyweight strength training, but those of us who feel that way are on the fringes. Go into any commercial gym and you're bound to see way more machines than anything else. In some of these places, you're lucky if there is even a pull-up bar or an open space to do push-ups.

RISE OF THE MACHINES

Most commercial fitness facilities are not designed to get you fit—they are designed to get your money. The fancy looking machines you see in these clubs are all hype. They don't work as well as bodyweight exercises, but they sure do look high-tech! Sadly, that's enough to trick the average person into shelling out lots of money for a gym membership they'll probably never even use anyway.

This doesn't mean you can't sculpt nice looking muscles using machines, it's just a ridiculous way to go about it. Selectorized fitness equipment movement patterns are not natural, and will have less carryover into real life activities. Plus you're much less likely to understand the movement of the human body if you're never really moving! If everything you do for your workout involves sliding a fixed piece of machinery along a predetermined path, you're just going through the motions. You're not truly creating movement.

While modern exercise equipment has only existed for a few decades, human beings have achieved fantastic physiques since the days of the ancient Greeks. If you want to build a better body, the only piece of equipment you'll need is something you already have—YOU! Stop making excuses and start working out!

3 - MASTERING YOUR BODYWEIGHT

I often joke that you've only truly mastered an exercise when you can do it under any circumstance. You could wake me up from a dead sleep at 3 a.m. and I could still bang out a pistol if I had to. Muscle-ups at midnight? Done and done.

But no matter how good you get at any given exercise, you can always aim to seek out new challenges.

While there's really no such thing as true mastery, it's great to strive for ideals as long as we realize they are just that—something to reach for. On the road to superior fitness, it is good to have a sense of your place so you can determine the logical way to progress.



In gymnastics (which is just a highly specified style of advanced bodyweight training) skills are generally ranked A through F, with A skills being the easiest. The standards are quite high, as back levers and front levers are only considered A level skills and muscle-ups are simply considered “basic skills.”

I thought a similar type of rating system might be nice for the rest of us. I decided to break down some of my favorite bodyweight exercises (and some that I aspire to one day have in my arsenal) using a 5 level system to assign them a difficulty rating. I’m not holding to the same standards that a gymnast might. Also remember that we will all progress differently and this may not represent a linear path for all to follow. Having made those caveats, here is what I’m proposing:

THE FIVE LEVELS OF BODYWEIGHT STRENGTH

Level 1 skills: Squat, Plank, Dip (Bench), Lunge, Push-up, Australian Pull-up

Level 2 skills: Hanging Knee Raise, Dip (Parallel Bars), Back Bridge, Elbow Lever, Handstand, Pull-up, Drinking Bird

Level 3 skills: L-sit, Pistol Squat, Handstand Push-up, Dragon Flag, Clutch Flag

Level 4 skills: Back Lever, Shrimp Squat, One-arm Push-up, Human Flag, Muscle-up

Level 5 skills: One-arm Pull-up, Planche, Front Lever, CTI

Remember, this list is nowhere near all-inclusive and all of these skills can be continually refined and improved no matter what your level. There is no true mastery. We are all growing and changing all the time. Conversely, bear in mind that it’s important to have a good foundation before trying advanced exercises like the planche and the human flag. Getting comfortable with the basics allows you to progress in a safe and effective manner. Furthermore, as different people have different strengths, you may find that you make quicker progress with some skills than with others. As always, strive to keep the beginner’s mind. No matter where you fall in the continuum, there are new challenges ahead!





4 - BODYWEIGHT DEADLIFT ALTERNATIVES

I've met a lot of people over the last few years who've been banged up from lifting weights and wanted to try switching over to calisthenics-based resistance training. Though these folks recognize the benefits of bodyweight training (improved joint health, increased mobility, greater proprioception, etc.), putting down the weights for good often comes with some hesitation.

One of the most common concerns I've heard about dropping the iron in favor of bodyweight training is that there's no way to replicate the classic deadlift. Push-ups can replace the bench press, squats can be done on one leg to add resistance and pull-ups are better than any pulling movement you can do with a weight anyway. But that deadlift is a bit of a doozy.

Though the specificity principle still applies (the best way to improve your deadlift is to practice deadlifting), you can still work your posterior chain and strengthen all the same muscles as the deadlift without any external weights.

BACK BRIDGES

Anyone who's got a solid back bridge can probably deadlift a respectable weight without too much trouble, though you're unlikely to see too many guys who are even capable of getting into a full back bridge if all they've been doing is lifting for years. The bridge will challenge your flexibility as it simultaneously strengthens your hamstrings, glutes, lower-back, upper-back and shoulders. It can take some time to build toward a full back bridge, so approach this move with reverence. As you get stronger, you can try it on one arm, one leg, or one arm and one leg!



ONE-LEGGED BODYWEIGHT DEADLIFTS

While many weightlifters dismiss this exercise as being too easy, the one-legged bodyweight deadlift is a fantastic way to build strength in your hamstrings, glutes, lower back and abs.



If done slowly and with strict attention to detail, performing a dozen or two one-legged body-weight deadlifts can be a serious challenge even for someone who's used to moving some heavy metal. Also known as the "Drinking Bird," one-legged deadlifts are an excellent balance and stability challenge as well.

PISTOL SQUATS

That's right, the pistol squat is such a well rounded exercise, it can fill in for both squats AND deadlifts. The pistol also requires considerable core strength (that means lower back too, not just abs!) in addition to strong glutes and hamstrings.

Of course the pistol is a big time quad exercise as well—you get a lot of "bang" for your buck with pistols!

If you aren't ready for the full pistol squat yet, there are many variations you can try. You can use a bench or pole for assistance, or find a buddy and practice the partner pistol, where you and your training partner assist each other for added stability.



LEVERS

There are many ways to perform lever holds and they all require a strong back, powerful core and total body control. The elbow lever is typically the easiest for beginners to start with, though the more advanced back lever is especially demanding on the posterior chain. Try pulling into a back lever from the bottom up and tell me it doesn't feel as hard as deadlifting a bar with twice your bodyweight.



ALTERNATIVES ROCK

While exercises like pistol squats and back levers require some strength to even begin training, newcomers can start practicing one legged deadlifts and back bridges early on in their training. As you get stronger, you can add assisted pistols and modified back levers into your routine, eventually working to the full versions.

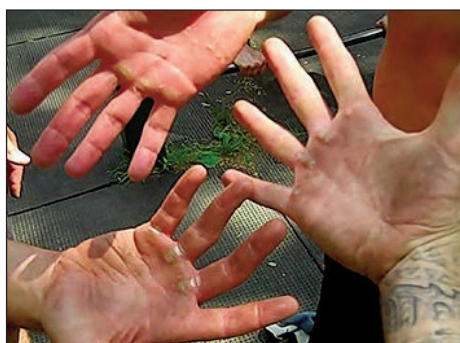
Anyone who consistently trains these four exercises will no doubt build a powerful posterior chain that any weightlifter ought to respect. And if you really love deadlifts, there's no reason you can't use them in addition to these other moves; it doesn't have to be an either/or scenario. Bodyweight training and weightlifting can happily coexist in the same program.

5 - WHY I DON'T WEAR WORKOUT GLOVES

When I was in highschool I got a pair of gloves to wear for lifting weights.

At the time I thought the gloves looked cool and since I had just gotten into working out, I wanted to have all the gear. I was probably concerned about preventing callouses too, but like most teenagers, looking cool trumped that.

Funny thing is, I wound up getting callouses anyway! Turns out there was still friction between my hands and the gloves when I would hold a heavy barbell or grasp a pull-up bar. Once I realized this, they started to look less cool to me.



GET A GRIP

I'm a minimalist in most aspects of my life and my feelings on workout gloves are a great example of that. For the same reasons I enjoy running with minimal footwear, I find working out barehanded to be a superior technique. If you've ever had to use a cell phone in the winter while wearing gloves you already know that having a glove in between your hand and whatever you are gripping acts as a barrier. Your coordination suffers and it's harder to get a sense of what you are doing.

Once you start going barehanded, you'll likely see an improvement in your grip strength and your body awareness. I want to feel as connected as possible to what I am doing with my body and gloves just get in the way of that.

One exception is if you are going to be moving on your hands in an urban setting where there may be broken glass or other tiny, sharp objects on the ground. When that is the case, gloves can be a safety precaution. A callous, on the other hand, never hurt anyone.

Yes, you're going to get callouses if you do lots of pull-ups or lift heavy weights—get over it. Nobody but you cares if you have callouses (even you ladies). Learn to see your callouses as a badge of honor—you earned them!

Besides, isn't it worth sacrificing that tiny bit of skin on the top of your palm in order to make the rest of your upper-body look amazing?

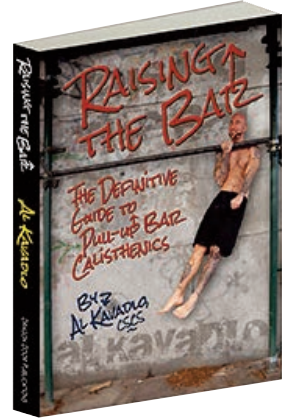




6 - CLEAN UP YOUR MUSCLE-UP

Since releasing my book *Raising The Bar* (and the companion DVD), dozens of people have written to tell me how my training advice helped them achieve their first muscle-up. Oftentimes they will send video footage along with it. I love getting these types of messages!

As we've discussed before, however, many people's first muscle-up ain't always so pretty. Though I am happy to grant some leeway on form when someone's learning a challenging new exercise, I don't want people all over the world doing ugly muscle-ups ("ugly-ups" as I like to call 'em) and crediting me with having taught them that way.



CLEAN AND CLEAR

While getting your first muscle-up is a wonderful fitness objective to work toward, simply getting your torso over the bar shouldn't be the end goal. Once you've achieved your first muscle-up, it's time to work on improving your form.

But before we get to cleaning up your technique, let's go over the two most common issues people new to the muscle-up kingdom may encounter:

UNEVEN ARMS

While allowing one arm to come up before the other can sometimes be a helpful gateway to cleaner muscle-ups, it is generally not a good long-term strategy. Though it may be the only way you're going to get a feel for the crucial transition from below the bar to being on top, it's best to try to shake this habit as soon as possible.



EXCESSIVE KIPPING

Almost everyone needs to kip a bit to do their first muscle-up, but once you can perform a few reps you should aim to steadily reduce your kip. Though a little kipping is certainly acceptable if you're doing reps on the bar, do your best to keep it to a minimum. If your knees are bending more than an inch or two or your legs are casting out too far in front of the bar, you need to clean it up.

FIXING YOUR FORM

Even if you're pretty good at muscle-ups, chances are you can benefit from the following training tactics. I recommend these three techniques for getting rid of the common form flaws and establishing yourself as a muscle-up master.

NEGATIVES

Just like in your early pull-up practice, negatives are a great way to establish a movement pattern in your nervous system. Start at the top of a muscle-up and lower yourself slowly to the bottom of the dip position with your chest leaning over the bar. Brace yourself and transition as carefully as possible from having your chest above the bar to the top of a pull-up position. Squeeze your abs tight and reach your legs away from the bar to counterbalance. At first you may not be able to control it much, but with time you will eventually get the hang of going slowly through the transition. Once this happens, controlled muscle-ups will soon follow.



GRADUAL KIP REDUCTION

Don't expect to suddenly go from your first sloppy muscle-up to replicating the opening of Andreas Aguilar's 1991 World Pro gymnastics routine. The only way to significantly minimize your kip is to do it slowly and gradually. If you find yourself bending your knees during your muscle-ups, focus on keeping your legs straight(er). If you're bucking your hips too much, imagine there is a wall a foot or two in front of the bar that you don't want to crash into.

When the objective is to improve your form, focus on performing fewer reps at a time. Sets of just one or two reps will allow you to focus on the subtle details of the movement pattern without getting fatigued. Like the old saying goes, "quality over quantity."

FALSE GRIP

It's great to practice explosive muscle-ups but slowing the movement down can add a whole new challenge, allowing you to build more strength in the transition from below to above the bar, which is the most crucial part of the exercise.

In order to do this, it's helpful to use a false grip, which entails bending your wrists over the bar so your hand won't need to roll around it during the transition. When you get to the top of the pull-up phase, your hands will already be in the right position. Some people even find an exaggerated false grip with closed fists resting on the bar to be ideal.



If you have access to them, learning the muscle-up on gymnastic rings can be a useful tool to help perfect your bar muscle-up. While the two skills are each unique in their own ways, there is a lot of carry-over from one to the other. If you don't have rings, practicing a false grip muscle-up between two parallel bars can give you a similar feeling.

7 - AVOIDING INJURIES IN STRENGTH TRAINING

Anyone who's worked out consistently for long enough has no doubt had to deal with an injury at some point. Setbacks can be frustrating, but if you train hard, eventually some type of injury may be inevitable.

In spite of over two decades of strength training, however, I've been fortunate enough to avoid anything serious. The worst I've had to deal with was a strained rotator cuff, some mild tendinitis and a few cuts, scrapes and bruises. If you train smart, you should be able to avoid any serious injuries as well.



LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

One of the most common questions I get asked is, “Is it okay to work out every day?” There is no universal answer that applies to everyone, as individual conditioning varies greatly from person to person. As a general rule, however, let your body rest if you feel sore, achy or tired. If you want to work out and you're still sore from a previous session, you might take a day to focus on flexibility or simply work around your sore muscles (train your legs if your arms are sore, for example). Another option is to do a low-intensity active recovery workout, like a jog or swim.

You might not always like what it has to say, but listening to your body is the best way to avoid injury. When you have aches and pains, you need to back off. Pay attention to how your body responds to different training programs and act accordingly.

GRADUAL PROGRESS

People who get injured in training usually do so because they attempted something far outside of their capabilities. While ambition is a great asset, you've got to be objective about what your body is realistically capable of handling. I'm all for pushing the boundaries of human performance, but you have to do so gradually!

Check out my ordered list of exercises in the “Mastering Your Bodyweight” article a few chapters back to get an idea of how to progress intelligently in the world of bodyweight strength training. You'll typically want to get to about 10 reps of a given exercise before moving on to harder progressions. For static holds (like planks and L-sits), aim for a 30 second hold or longer.



BALANCING ACT

It is important to make sure that your strength training routine doesn't favor any one movement pattern too heavily. The phrase "antagonistic balance" refers to maintaining a healthy symmetry between opposing muscle groups. The more you maintain balance throughout your body, the better off you'll be. If your routine is all push-ups and no pull-ups, you could wind up with shoulder problems and poor posture. Likewise, neglecting your glutes, hamstrings and lower back can lead to joint pain and postural issues. This is why back bridges should be a mainstay of any fitness regimen.

LIVE AND LEARN

Injuries may sometimes be unavoidable, but I believe we are all ultimately responsible for our own fate. Be smart, stay humble and pick yourself up when you fall. If you do get injured, perhaps you can learn from the experience and avoid repeating your mistakes. Remember, an expert is just a beginner who didn't quit.









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PART III

Do You Do CARDIO?

*“If you don't know
where you're going,
you might wind up
someplace else.”*

—Yogi Berra



Walk. But also...
Work Out!

1 - IS WALKING REALLY THE BEST EXERCISE?

Most doctors agree that walking is one of the best forms of exercise. But I think that's bullshit!

Unless you are elderly or morbidly obese, walking falls into the category of what I like to call “physical activity”—it's not a workout.

It's certainly better for your body than lying on the couch (or slumping over at a desk—sit up straight!), but it doesn't meet my standards of true exercise.

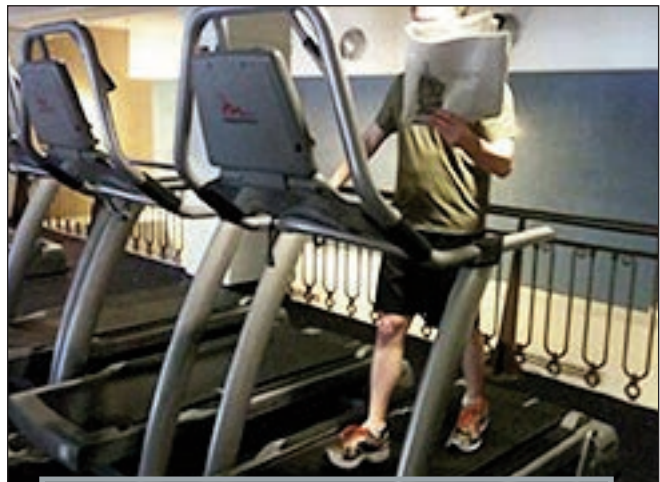
In order for something to count as a workout there are three basic requirements that must be met: elevated heart rate, muscle fatigue, and sweat. Power-walking might fulfill these requirements, but for most of us, just taking a stroll ain't gonna do it.

Don't get me wrong, walking is great physical activity and most Americans probably ought to be doing a lot more of it. As a New York City resident, I walk just about everywhere. I just don't kid myself into thinking that it's a workout!

Walking can definitely add up over the course of the day, leading to weight loss, which is probably part of the reason why New Yorkers tend to be slimmer than most Americans—so I encourage you to walk as much as possible. Everybody should be getting at least an hour or two of daily physical activity. It's just that you should do some real workouts, too!

Walk? Yes!

But also...Work Out!!



This man is not working out.



2 - BODYWEIGHT CONDITIONING

In Progressive Calisthenics, we tend to emphasize strength. Many of the most visually impressive calisthenics moves require little more than a high strength-to-mass ratio. Though I often point out that true bodyweight mastery encompasses flexibility and balance as well, if you actually want to perform well in sports (or any prolonged physical activity) there's another crucial piece to the puzzle: conditioning. A few lucky people are born athletes; the rest of us need to put in some extra work.

Strength is a fairly easy concept for most people to understand, but conditioning can be confusing. What exactly does it mean to be conditioned?

One way to think of conditioning is the ability to perform continuous work without fatigue. It's impressive to see someone muster a clean muscle-up or a precise pistol squat; it's a whole different task to perform multiple muscle-ups and pistol squats in the same circuit without resting!

One of the biggest misconceptions about strength and conditioning is that they are on opposite ends of the fitness spectrum. Though there may be some merit to this in certain cases, my personal experience has been that the better my work capacity becomes, the more potential I have for building new strength.

Furthermore, training for endurance challenges like a marathon or triathlon can help you reach new levels of mental resolve. Your mind must be strong enough to push through the physical discomfort of your training in order to cause adaptations in your body. This mental fortitude can be cultivated through practice and will carry over into your strength training. The stronger your heart, lungs, mind and general recovery abilities, the more volume you will be able to handle in your strength work.

Sometimes conditioning is mistakenly confused with cardiovascular endurance, which is only one aspect of it. Conditioning is actually a combination of several components including cardiovascular output, aerobic capacity, lactic threshold and, perhaps most importantly, familiarity with the given modality. The better your technique, the less energy you need to exert. That's why athletics tend to be so specified. Powerlifters and gymnasts are among the strongest athletes, but I've never heard of anyone who successfully competed in both at an elite level. Likewise, boxers and basketball players both tend to be highly conditioned, yet their individual skillsets are specific to their individual sports.



While sport specific work typically makes up the bulk of most athlete's practice time, almost every serious athlete also dedicates a good deal of time to improving their overall fitness by practicing general conditioning exercises that require little skill.



Though I find the conventional approach to “cardio” a huge turn-off, I absolutely believe that even the casual fitness enthusiast should be capable of demonstrating basic fitness conditioning in a variety of contexts.

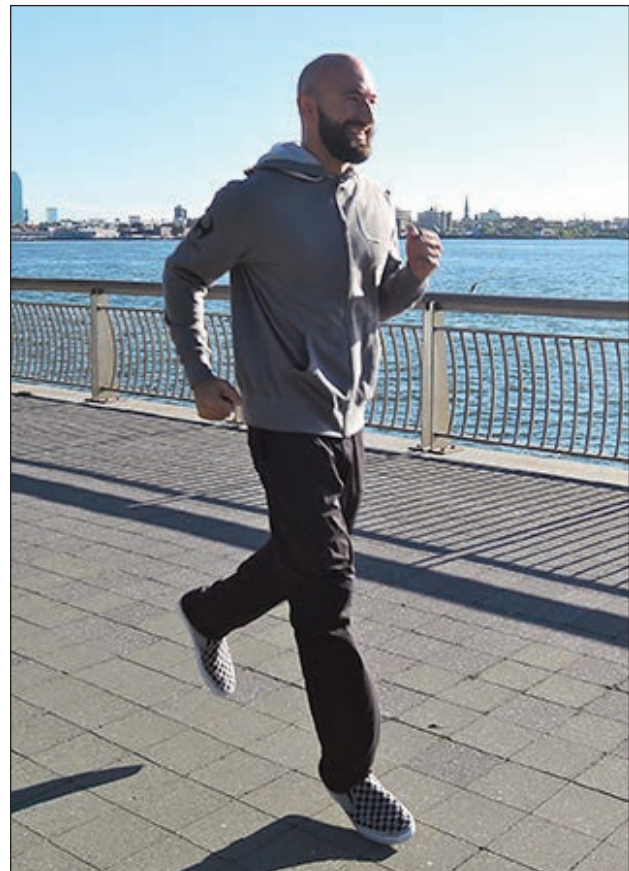
Ahead are some bodyweight conditioning exercises that you can practice outdoors, along with brief suggestions on how to begin incorporating them into your routine.

No cardio machines required!

JOGGING

Boxers and other athletes have been incorporating “road work” into their training for generations. Arguably the most fundamental form of bodyweight exercise ever, jogging may be the best place for you to begin building your conditioning. The key is to go at a slow enough pace to maintain a steady speed for as long as possible. For beginners this may be slow and brief, which is fine. With consistency you can build to longer amounts of time and also begin to increase your speed.

If you are new to jogging, I recommend alternating between jogging and walking for a minute each, for no more than 30 minutes total. Focus on staying light on your feet in order to minimize any joint impact. Though there is some technique involved, running is a fairly low-skill activity. Any able-bodied person can begin a running program, you just need to go slowly and be willing to put your ego aside.



Since jogging is low impact and low intensity, you can start with three days a week, adding more days as your abilities improve. Eventually you can build up to several miles a day if you so desire.

SPRINTING

When you are new to running, maintaining a steady jog can quickly start to feel like a sprint! Once your legs have acclimated to the point where you can handle 20 minutes or more of steady jogging, however, I recommend incorporating some real sprint work into your regimen.

After a 5-10 minute jog to warm up, aim for 3-5 rounds of 10-20 second sprints with 3-5 minutes of recovery time between rounds. As sprinting is much more intense than jogging, I suggest you keep your frequency fairly low. Once a week should be plenty to start.

Sprinting is a relative term, so don't worry too much about how fast you are actually going. Instead, focus on your intensity. Try to push yourself to 90-95% of how fast you would run if you were being chased by a bear!



STAIR CLIMBING

If you have access to stadium bleachers (or don't mind being the weirdo running up the stairs at the office), stair climbing is another simple activity that can greatly improve your overall conditioning. There are some people who get winded walking up one flight of stairs, others can run to the top of the Empire State building in under 10 minutes. No matter where you fall on the spectrum, you can get a great workout on the stairs without spending much time or any money.

Stair climbing is best approached with a slow-and-steady mindset. Start out by attempting to walk up stairs at a continuous pace for 10-20 minutes. Over time you can build to running the stairs and doing longer distances.

SWIMMING

I almost didn't include swimming on this list because it requires a body of water, which not everyone has access to. Ultimately, however, it is a bodyweight exercise that anyone can do and there are plenty of naturally occurring places to swim (you don't have to go to the pool). The great thing about swimming is that it is very low impact, therefore making it safe for pretty much anyone, regardless of weight problems or joint issues. As swimming requires a lot more technique than the other activities on this list, you may need to take some lessons when you are starting out (or restarting after a long hiatus).

As before, focus on your relative intensity rather than how fast you are going. Beginners can start out by swimming several sets of 20-50 meters at a time with short recovery breaks in between efforts. From there you can gradually build to swimming continuously for 30 minutes or longer.



CARDIO CALISTHENICS

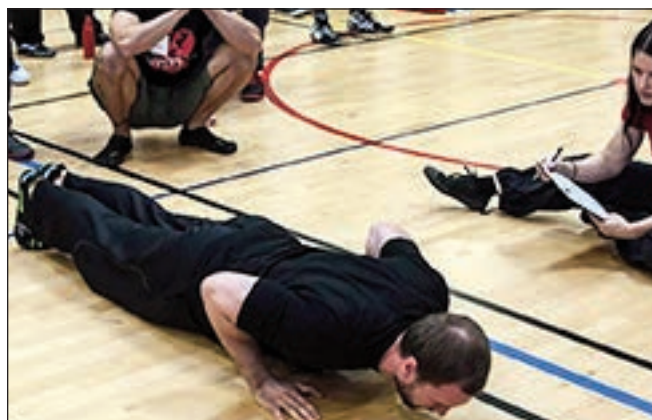
I hate using the word cardio, but I sure love me some alliteration! Cardio calisthenics are bodyweight exercises that require fairly low levels of strength so that they can be performed for extended amounts of time. Jumping jacks, mountain climbers and burpees are all examples of cardio calisthenics. As you get stronger, push-ups, pull-ups and even pistol squats can become conditioning exercises.

A sample cardio calisthenics workout might consist of 50 jumping jacks, followed by 40 mountain climbers, followed by 20 burpees. Rest between each exercise as needed and aim to repeat the whole circuit 3-5 times. Eventually you can try building to 5 rounds with no rest.



THE CENTURY

That's right, the PCC Century Test is both a strength and conditioning challenge. I've observed several PCC hopefuls over the last year and a half who were strong enough to do the required reps for each exercise individually but lacked the conditioning to recover enough to perform all 100 reps in the 8 minutes needed to earn the PCC credential. If you want to be a PCC, you've got to have a solid foundation of strength and conditioning.



GET IT TOGETHER

In my early twenties, I could do 20 pull-ups or 50 push-ups with no problem, but I couldn't even run one mile. My weak link was exposed when I attended a personal trainer workshop that included a barrage of fitness tests, one of which was a 1.5 mile run. Even though I didn't finish last, it was a big embarrassment for me. After that humbling experience I decided I needed to work on my conditioning, but I had no idea where to start! When will I fit it into my schedule? What if I lose strength? I was filled with doubts, but they were really just excuses. Just like your strength training, if you are serious about improving your conditioning, you will find the time to make it happen.

I began to practice running in the mornings before breakfast and moved my strength work to afternoons or evenings. On days where I didn't have time for both strength and conditioning, I got in whatever I could. Sometimes I combined the two by doing circuit workouts like the ones mentioned above. Like anything, the beginning was the hardest part. As I often say, the first is the worst! I was successful because I didn't take an all-or-nothing approach to fitness. Some workouts were more encouraging than others, but over time I found that consistency matters most. Slowly, my conditioning began to improve as well as my strength. The same will happen to you if you make the decision and follow through. Stop overthinking things and get started!



THE BEACH FRI NIGHTS

CONY ISLAND FILM FESTIVAL EARLY FALL

SNAKEOLOGY S ALIVE

ELECTRA ALIVE

TATTOOED

STRANGE ME

CONEY

3006 W 12th
24-hour
emergency exit
do not block

3 - BEGINNING RUNNING

As a kid, I got into working out because I wanted to put on muscle. Running had absolutely no appeal to me; runners were skinny guys and I wanted to get diesel. And besides, running sucks! Who the hell would just want to run around for hours for no reason? I was going to lift weights, do pull-ups and get jacked.

Ironically, most people who begin running are drawn to it for the exact reason that I was turned off—they want to be skinny!

Turns out we're both wrong.

Running has seen a boom in recent years, but along with that explosion there has also been a backlash. Distance running has been called “chronic cardio” by members of the Primal/Paleo community and has been blamed for countless ailments and injuries. A lot of the backlash against running is aimed at those who are motivated primarily by a desire to lose weight (and those in the industry who pander to them).

Truth is, while running can burn lots of calories, unless you change your eating habits, you're unlikely to see any significant weight loss from beginning a running program. In spite of this, I believe that everyone should give running a shot as part of their fitness program. Especially those of you who hate it.



FOR THE LOVE OF RUNNING

When most people (even fit people) begin running, there is an adaptation period that can be unpleasant and frustrating. Once you cross that threshold, however, the improvement that you will feel in your day to day life is significant. The increased aerobic capacity and cardiovascular function is just the beginning. You'll also develop leg endurance that can carry over into walking, stair climbing and other everyday activities.

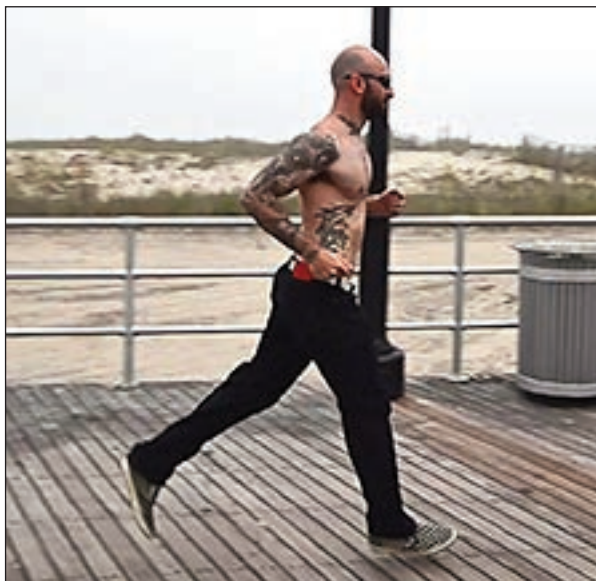


Of course, the best motivation to run is simply that it feels great (once you get accustomed to it). Simple pleasures make life worth living and few things rank higher on my list than a good run. Running can be an acquired taste, but just like riding a bike, once you get the mechanics down and start to build some endurance, it becomes a whole different experience.

DESIGNING A RUNNING PROGRAM

In the beginning, start out with run/walk intervals. You don't need to follow a strict protocol, just run at a steady pace for as long as you can (which might be anywhere from 30 seconds to several minutes). When you need to, take a break and walk until you catch your breath. Repeat this process for 20 or 30 minutes, then stretch out and call it a day. In time, your walk breaks will get shorter and shorter until you can eventually go for 30 minutes without a break. Once you can do that, you can try alternating between jogging and sprinting for your interval training.

LSD RUNNING



Anyone who'd want to run a marathon must be tripping, right?

Seriously though, if you're crazy enough to want to do a marathon, be smart about it—you're going to need to run at a substantially slower pace and gradually build up your mileage. This type of running is usually referred to as long slow distance or "LSD" running.

LSD running is slow enough that you can maintain a conversation while running, so feel free to invite a workout partner. Take your time on LSD runs, it should feel almost like how walking feels to a non-runner.

RUNNING IS FUN-CTIONAL

For those of you who still think strength training is all you need, keep in mind that in the wild, you're either quick or you're dead. For that reason, running is the most functional bodyweight exercise out there.

I don't care how strong you are, if you can't run, you're not fit. But perhaps more importantly, you're missing out on a lot of fun!

4 - RACING THE NYC MARATHON

Running the 2009 NYC Marathon was an amazing and overwhelming experience! Just getting from my apartment in the East Village all the way out to the start in Staten Island was an ordeal all in itself.

My day started at 5 a.m. when I got out of bed and immediately started drinking water and eating bananas. I wanted to be sure I was hydrated and had lots of potassium in my system. Plus I love bananas!



Thousands of us waiting
in line to check in.



By six I was already out the door and on my way to the train to catch the 7 a.m. ferry to Staten Island. After the ferry ride, there was a shuttle bus to the check in area. Then I had to check my bag, wait for a porto-potty and find my way to the start corral. By the time I got there it was already 9:30. Even though at times it was disorienting or frustrating due to the incredibly large crowd (over 40,000 entrants!), the New York Road Runners did a great job organizing this amazing event!

The race itself was incredible. The excitement of the crowds, the support of friends and family, and the beauty of the city itself all served to make for an unforgettable experience. The highs were some of the most amazing moments of my life, the lows were among the hardest. I felt great for the first 3 hours of the race but around mile 19 or 20 my legs started to feel very fatigued.

My original plan was to finish in under 4 hours, but I knew I couldn't keep up a 9 minute mile pace any longer, and if I tried I would be asking for trouble. At that point the game plan simply became to finish the race. From then on I knew that no matter how much pain I was in, even if I had to crawl, I was not going to stop until I crossed the finish line!

I finally made it at 4:22:11, which averages out to almost exactly a 10 minute mile pace. Crossing the finish line was an unexplainably exhilarating feeling, but it was soon followed by one of the worst feelings in the world. When you finish a 26.2 mile run it hurts to walk, but the only thing that hurts even more than walking is having to stop and stand. And that's exactly what you have to do for a good twenty or thirty minutes while everyone is huddled together trying to get their bags, take photos, and meet with loved ones. But overall it was an absolute blast! I definitely plan on doing another marathon at some point, but I think my next race is going to be a 5k.

5 - RACING THE NYC TRIATHLON



Ever since running the NYC Marathon back in 2009, racing the NYC Triathlon has been next on my fitness bucket-list. After last Sunday, I can now scratch that one off, too!

The tri was a great experience, and finishing is an accomplishment that I will be proud of for the rest of my life. However, I went through many different feelings and emotions throughout the race. As the famous Dickens quote goes, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...”

THE SWIM

The hardest part of the whole race was dealing with the anxiety in the morning. From the moment I woke up I had butterflies in my stomach; I didn’t really settle into my groove until a few minutes after I got in the water. As someone who never really swam as a kid, jumping feet first into the Hudson was the part that I was most anxious about. (Only the pros dive in head first, thankfully!) Once I settled in, however, the swim went very well.

Though it has a bad reputation, the water in the Hudson was no more disgusting than the water at Coney Island

where I did most of my open-water triathlon training. There was some seaweed to contend with and I bumped into a log once, but it was pretty minor compared to some of the horror stories I’ve heard from other triathletes (though I did catch an elbow in the face near the start of the swim).

The downstream current in the Hudson definitely helped with my time, though I found myself getting pulled to the left as well. I spent a good deal of the swim trying to steer myself back to the middle. Though I couldn’t see or hear much in the water, I was reminded very loudly by some of the crew who were following along in canoes to “STAY TO THE RIGHT!”



As the visibility in the water was virtually nonexistent, I didn't realize I was close to the end until I was within about 100 meters. Needless to say, I was quite pleased to see it when I did!

THE BIKE

After the swim there's a barefoot run (on pavement!) into the transition area, which is just a field with a bunch of bike racks on it. I took my time in the first transition since I wanted to carefully remove my wetsuit, clean my feet, have a snack, drink some water, pee, etc. I also wanted to check that all my things were okay (they were). Since getting a good night's sleep was a priority for me, I had left all my stuff there the night before. (Many participants forgo some sleep to bring their gear to the transition the morning of the race).



The bike ride was longer and more challenging than I had anticipated. Between the July heat and the steep hills, the ride dragged on for what seemed like an eternity. Since I was in one of the later start waves, the pack had thinned out quite a bit and there weren't many other cyclists around. There were times when I didn't see anyone else on the road at all. As I was alone for much of the ride, it didn't feel like much of a "race" at all—I took it slow on most of the hills and eventually I made it to the end.

THE RUN

Once the bike ride was over, there was a huge sense of relief. So many things are out of your control during the swim and the bike (someone crashing into you, a flat tire, etc.), but once I was on to the run, I knew it was all up to me. Nothing could take it away at that point.

I took the first couple of miles slow and easy and eventually started to find my legs in mile three. I kept it at a steady pace, splashing cups of water on my face every time I passed the aid tables (I managed to get some water down my throat as well). The last mile of the run I kicked it up a notch, triumphantly crossing the finish line with a net time of 3:36:13.

I didn't look at a clock once during the race, which I think helped me pace myself and enjoy the journey without getting caught up in any of the ego stuff. I just listened to my body and tried to stay at a moderate level of exertion for most of the race. The only time I turned up the juice was near the end of the run.

In retrospect, I know I could have done the whole thing faster if I pushed a bit harder, but I have no regrets about my performance. With all the things that could potentially go wrong during a triathlon, I am just glad I made it across the finish line in one piece.



6 - DEATH TO CARDIO

After racing the NYC Triathlon last week, I've decided that I'm never doing cardio again.

In fact, I actually stopped doing cardio workouts a long time ago.

In the context of my overall training schedule, I don't even see the race itself as cardio. It was a one-off endurance challenge, and really more mental than physical.



The difference between seeing your workout as “cardio” vs. seeing it as “practice” may be a subtle distinction, but I believe it is an extremely important one. People who “do cardio” tend to have one objective in mind: weight loss. As we’ve discussed, however, exercise alone is not a very effective way to lose weight (you have to eat less crap in order to do that!), but the mindset you bring to any activity can greatly impact your experience.

Rather than forcing yourself to simulate movement on a piece of machinery for a set amount of time, a better way to approach your training might be to work on skill improvement. While there are certainly benefits to “gym cardio” (improved circulation, increased cardiac output, higher oxygen uptake/utilization efficiency), part of what makes exercise worth doing is the activity itself. I personally never met anyone who genu-

inely enjoys an hour alone on the stationary bike, but it’s fun and exciting to do something like a triathlon—and all of us have that potential.

SKILL POWER

You can become a perfectly good runner without ever worrying about how many calories you burned, what your target heart rate is or even knowing exactly how much distance you've covered. And you'll probably enjoy the process a whole lot more without wasting mental space on trivialities. Treat your workout as skill practice and the shift in perspective turns any health benefits into an added bonus. You might even forget you're working out and start having some old-fashioned fun!

Don't get me wrong—exercise isn't always gummy bears and double rainbows, but it shouldn't be torturous either. There are plenty of times when I feel challenged during a workout, but pushing through those uncomfortable moments leads to a better understanding of my body—as well as personal growth.

I firmly believe that any “fit” person ought to be able to run a few miles or swim to shore should they find themselves in such a predicament (in addition to being able to do some pull-ups, of course!). Besides, if you focus on improving at physical skills, you're inevitably going to get in better shape along the way. Having a good body is nice, but being physically capable is empowering.

Swimming? For sure!





PART IV

STAY HUNGRY

*“Hunger is insolent,
and will be fed.”*

–Homer

“Food goes in here.”

–Homer Simpson



1 - WHY I DON'T USE SUPPLEMENTS

The world of exercise supplements is full of lies. There's the obvious bullshit cashing in on pop culture and the gullibility of the masses, like the stuff endorsed by Jillian Michaels or "The Situation." But there's also the more subversive lies, the ones that are "backed by science" which sometimes manage to mislead even the most savvy exercise enthusiasts.

We all know that statistics are easy to manipulate, and studies are constantly surfacing that contradict older studies, yet many people still fall victim to misleading claims from supplement companies.

Why?

Because people want a shortcut.



DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE

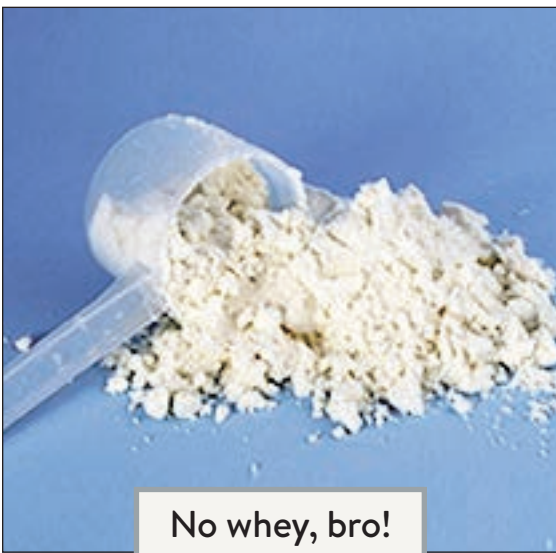
All supplement claims are based more on hype than evidence. The next time you read a positive supplement review, check to see if the magazine or website that you read it on happens to sell the product or receive sponsorship from the product's manufacturer. As for other claims? Don't underestimate the power of the placebo effect. A lot of people tend to just see what they want to see. Besides, once you've spent your money on a product, it's harder to admit you were mistaken.

There are a couple of supplements that might actually have some impact on your training (ya know, like, if you're a pro athlete or something), so let's take a look at the few that are even worth disputing. The first of them is something most Americans are already using.

CAFFEINE

Anyone who's had a strong cup of coffee knows that caffeine can give you a temporary boost. Your heart speeds up, your pupils dilate and you feel a sense of heightened awareness. There are numerous studies that have concluded that large amounts of caffeine can help endurance athletes, but hey, studies can be shown to "prove" just about anything. I've tried using caffeine before running but never observed any significant benefits from it, so I don't anymore.

PROTEIN POWDERS



Even though they taste bad and give most people a stomach ache, protein powders are among the top selling exercise supplements in the world. The rhetoric about how you've got to get tons of protein to grow is so powerful that it makes most people ignore the taste (and their irritable bowels) while they continue to shovel scoop after scoop of this crap into their bodies. Oh, and if you don't have your protein shake immediately following your workout, you've just wasted your entire life.

Of course you need protein to synthesize muscle growth, but you can get plenty of it by eating real food. A 6-oz. steak has over 50 grams of protein, plus it feels a hell of a lot better in my belly than a shaker full of sludgy water. Whey? No way!

CREATINE

Creatine is a substance that is naturally found in the body (it's actually a fuel source used during muscle contraction), by supplementing with it, you're simply stocking up on extra so that you don't run out as quickly (I know it's a bit more complicated than that, but I'm trying to keep this brief). Studies have shown creatine to be effective in producing short-term strength gains and it will give you "the pump"—your muscles will swell up and retain water, making you a little stronger and bulkier.

After the "loading phase" in which you're directed to take creatine several times a day, you drop down to a simple once-a-day dosage. Even though my chest got puffed up and I added a few pounds to my deadlift while taking creatine, after several weeks when I cycled off (the long term effects of ongoing creatine use are still unknown and potentially dangerous), all of the strength and mass I gained while taking the supplement went away with it. That's still more than I can say for the other supplements on this list though; at least creatine actually helped my strength while I was using it.

AMINO ACIDS (GLUTAMINE, BCAA'S, ETC.)

Amino acids are often referred to as the “building blocks of muscle” so it would make sense that adding them into your beverage in the form of a powder would mean more muscle. At least that’s what I thought when I started supplementing with glutamine over ten years ago. However, after several weeks the only difference I noticed was that I had less money in my checking account (it also made my smoothies taste chalky). Remember that steak with its real-food protein goodness? It has all the amino acids you’ll need.

SEE FOR YOURSELF

I came to these conclusions after my own personal experiments with supplements over the years, but if you’re curious, there’s no substitute for firsthand knowledge. Obviously there are a lot of people who disagree with my views, as the exercise supplement business continues to be a multi-million dollar industry.

2 - DIET AND EXERCISE

Diet and exercise are probably the two biggest factors in determining your overall wellness. Just like my workout regimen, I aim to keep my diet simple and stick to the fundamentals.

To paraphrase from Michael Pollan’s book *In Defense of Food*, my dietary advice is this: eat real food, not processed crap.

A simple concept, but one that can be surprisingly difficult to implement in our current cultural climate.

Here are a few quick tips to help you out:

1. Look at the ingredients that are in the “foods” you purchase. If there are things in there that you don’t know what they are/can’t pronounce, then it’s probably not food.
2. Stay away from “foods” that make claims like “low fat” or “low sugar.” They are usually compensating for some other nutritional shortcoming and/or are filled with chemicals to enhance the flavor.
3. Eat lots of fresh fruits and veggies! I cannot stress this one enough. Fruits and veggies are the foundation of a healthy diet.

It’s not always easy to practice ideal eating habits, so just take it one meal at a time.



POST WORKOUT NUTRITION

Breakfast may be the most important meal of the day, but post-workout is also a key time to be mindful of your diet (for me, they're often the same meal). This doesn't mean you need to consume a bunch of supplements and protein powders. On the contrary, supplements are usually processed halfway to hell and loaded with chemicals and sugars. Just eat real food!

“AL APPROVED” FOODS

Here are my recommendations on what to eat. Use the following ingredients to prepare whatever you like! I've listed them in order of how strongly I recommend you eat them: Vegetables, fruits, roots, seeds, nuts, nut-butters, grass-fed beef, free-range chicken (and other poultry), fish, pork, lamb, eggs, olive oils, dairy, teas, coffees, red wines.



3 - THE BEST EXERCISE FOR WEIGHT LOSS

People often ask me, “Al, what’s the best exercise for weight loss?” The problem with that question is it assumes exercise is the best way to lose weight.

While things like running and cross training are great ways to burn calories, the fact of the matter is that your diet has more to do with your body fat percentage than any other factor.

It doesn’t matter if you run every morning, lift weights in the afternoon and go to yoga at night. If you can’t keep your diet in check, you’ll likely have a tough time staying lean for the long haul.

Sure, exercise plays a part in weight loss—after all, exercise builds muscle, and having more lean muscle mass will increase your resting metabolism. Plus exercise burns plenty of calories. In spite of these factors, I maintain that the best way to get lean is simply to eat foods that are as close to their original state as possible. Go to your local farmers’ market and load up on fresh fruits and veggies (or grow your own).

Of course big corporations don’t want you to do that—it means less money for them. They want you as fat as possible and they will do anything they can to fool you into buying their lies. So what should you eat? How about trying one of my delicious smoothie recipes!

THE CLASSIC PB/BANANA

- 2 Tablespoons of Natural Peanut Butter
- 1 Banana
- 6 oz. Milk
- 3-5 Ice Cubes

AL’S OLD SCHOOL PB&J

- 4 oz. Milk
- 1 Heaping Cup of Berries (a mix of your choosing)
- 3 Tablespoons of Natural Peanut Butter
- 1/2 Banana (optional)
- 3-5 Ice Cubes

THE BLUEBERRY BLASTER

- 6 oz. Milk
- 2 Tablespoons of Almond Butter
- 1/2 Pound of Fresh Blueberries
- 1 Banana
- 3-5 Ice Cubes



All you need for the Classic
PB/Bannana

4 - I ♥ PEANUT BUTTER!

Ever since I can recall, I've always loved peanut butter.

As a kid, PB&J sandwiches were a staple of my diet, and though I don't eat as much bread these days (or as much jelly), I'd never think of ending my love affair with the creamiest of all nut-butters.

PEANUTS ARE NUT-RITIOUS

I didn't think much about nutrition growing up, other than holding onto the belief that anything labeled as "healthy" probably tasted bad and should therefore be avoided. Had I known peanut butter could be good for you, that might have been a turn-off. (Though at the time I only ate the candy peanut butter anyway.)

In time my perspective began to change and by my early twenties longevity suddenly mattered, so I decided to start eating healthy. Or at least I tried to start eating healthy. With so much misinformation out there, it's really hard to even know what's healthy and what isn't. One thing I quickly found out was that Skippy and Jif and all my other favorite brands of PB had been processed to the point where they were just straight-up junk food. The good stuff is the natural peanut butter—the kind with the oil floating on top. Stirring it together can even be a bonus workout—it's win/win!

WHICH BUTTER IS BETTER?

Switching to natural peanut butter in my early twenties was a life-altering moment for me. This was also around the time I first heard about "good fats" (ya know, the non-hydrogenated kind). Look at the nutrition label on your peanut butter—some brands try to market themselves as natural when they are not. Stay away from PB that contains any ingredients other than peanuts (and possibly salt).





Not only is natural PB a healthier option, but I also think it tastes better. I didn't think that right away though of course. Like exercise, natty PB can be an acquired taste, but I was hooked by the time I finished my first jar!

THE BUTTER BATTLE

Just when I thought I had this whole nut butter thing figured out, new information about PB started to come to light. In certain circles, peanut butter was becoming the bad guy. Now the experts were saying that almond butter or macadamia nut butter were better options. It turns out that peanuts aren't even nuts! It's true—contrary to what its name might lead you to believe, the peanut is technically not a nut—it's a legume.

LEGUMES ME?

I've never been too much of a stickler for terminology myself, but people sure love to categorize things! While legumes and nuts have many similarities, what makes the peanut more pea than nut is that nuts grow on trees, while legumes grow in the ground. Nutritionally, legumes tend to contain a high amount of lectins, which have been linked to gastrointestinal distress and other health issues.

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE NUTTY

The world of nutrition can be a tricky place, and there are pros and cons to all situations. In spite of their lectin content (and by the way—just about all foods contain varying degrees of lectins), I believe this is a situation of the good outweighing the bad. Peanuts are inexpensive compared to almonds and macadamias, plus they are full of nutrients. They're also a great source of protein and—most importantly—they're delicious!



Ingredients: Dry Roasted Unblanched Peanuts

5 - ALL OR MUFFIN

While I strive to avoid heavily processed foodstuffs and snack treats, I know it's not realistic to think I'll never again indulge my sweet tooth.

If I find myself overcome with desire for a gigantic muffin or an entire pint of Ben and Jerry's, I might be able to talk myself down from the ledge, but sometimes jumping headfirst into a carb-frenzy is the only way to get it out of my system.

For individuals who are trying to take the fast-track to weight loss, giving into one urge can sometimes be a slippery slope, but for those of us who are focused on the big picture, occasionally indulging those urges can actually help tame the beast within.



BE HERE NOW

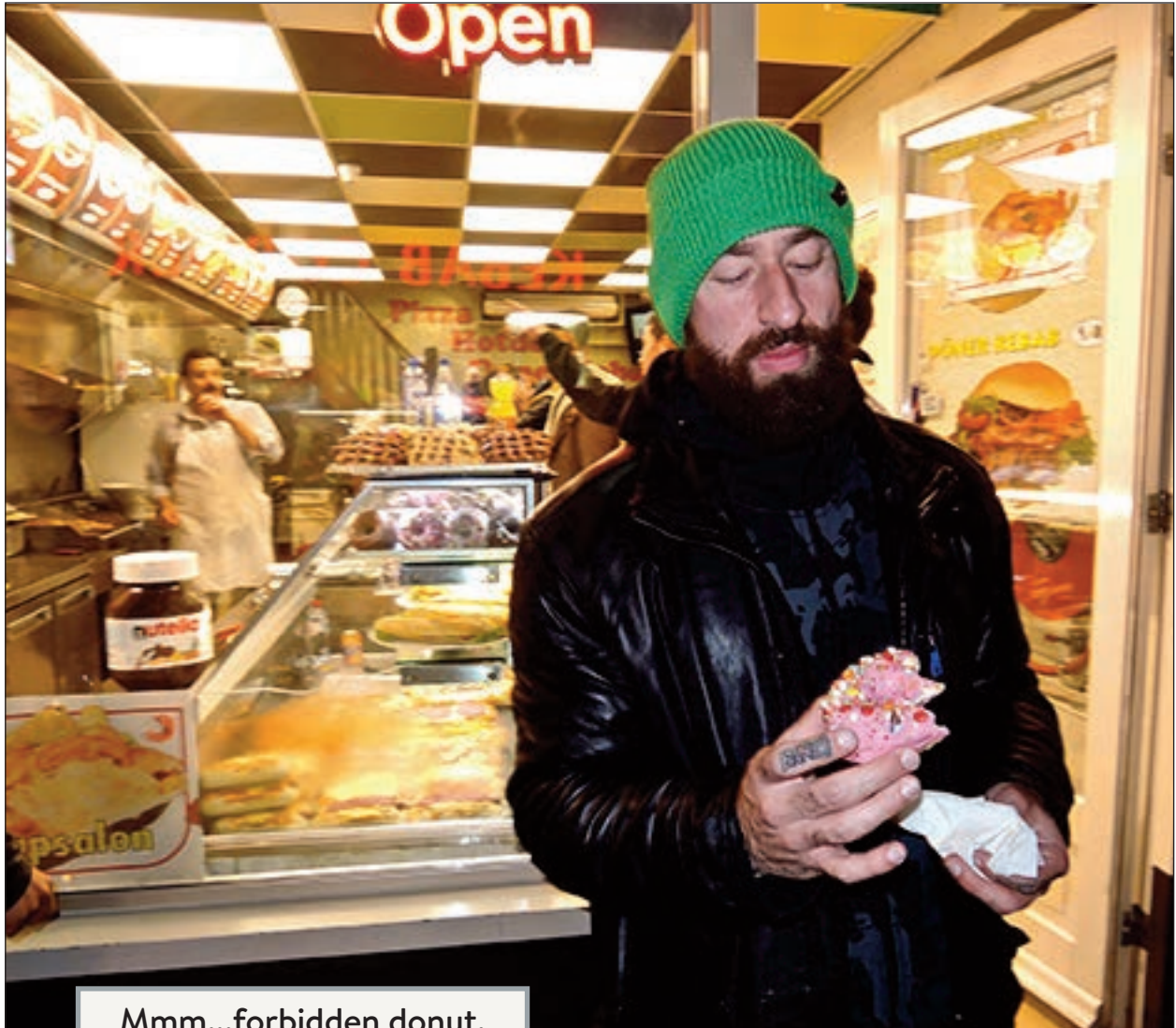
People sit in movie theaters across the country shoveling popcorn into their mouths, virtually unaware of the stimulus to their taste buds as they are of their over-taxed hearts beating in their weak little chests.

If you've made the conscious decision to eat something you know to be of sub-optimal nutrition, you'd better savor every bite. And that's easier to do when you're giving your food your full attention.



DON'T HAVE A CHEAT DAY

I know some people who will eat clean all week, then give themselves a cheat day to satisfy their pent up cravings. While this is obviously better than eating crap all the time, I find it more sustainable to spread my indulgences out through the week. If I have ice cream on Monday, onion rings on Wednesday and a piece of cheesecake on Saturday, I'm able to keep my cravings from building up to the point where I have to go completely wild on the seventh day. This approach usually keeps me from waking up with a full-on junk food hangover and having the "I'm never doing that again" conversation with myself.



Mmm...forbidden donut.

BE REAL

Of course it would be better for my body to never eat any of my favorite junk foods again, but life ain't ever gonna be perfect. Even with four or five treats a week, I'm still eating clean around 80% of the time (I eat a lot!). Since my workout schedule allows me to consume large amounts of calories, I could get away with eating a lot worse than I do and still stay lean. However, nutrition is about more than one's body fat percentage. Luckily, I've managed to keep both of those things in check, even with my occasional penchant for ice cream.



It must be all the pull-ups!



BONUS SECTION:

SAMPLE WORKOUTS

*“You can’t build
a reputation on what
you are going to do.”*

—Henry Ford

SAMPLE WORKOUTS

Each of the following sample workouts includes 6 exercises designed to hit all of the body's muscles from various angles. Feel free to perform these workouts as written, or modify/combine them in any way you see appropriate. You may see fit to change the number of sets and reps, the order of the exercises or even swap some moves out for others based on your own individual goals, strengths and weaknesses. As we discussed earlier, you're probably going to need to make adjustments as you go based on what's actually happening in the moment. No matter what, the most important thing is to take action. We're Working Out!!

SAMPLE WORKOUT #1 - BODYWEIGHT BEGINNER

1. Deep Bodyweight Squat

Stand up straight with your feet shoulder width apart. Engage your core and brace your back as you lower your butt towards your heels and raise your arms straight out in front of you. Keep your chest tall and chin up. Aim to get your hips below your knees before returning to the top position to start the next rep.

2 sets x 20 reps



2. Push-up

Get into a horizontal position facing the ground with your palms on the floor below your shoulders and your feet together. Keep your body in a straight line as you lower your chest to the ground and press yourself back to the top position. Be careful to avoid bending at the hips.

2 sets x 15 reps

3. Walking Lunge

Beginning in a standing position, take a big step forward then carefully lower your back knee until it's just above the ground. Your front foot should remain totally flat while your back foot bends, allowing the heel to come up. Now stand up and take a step forward, bringing your feet together. Repeat on the opposite leg.

2 sets x 20 reps (10 each leg, alternating legs)



4. Bodyweight Row

(Australian Pull-up)

Get down under a bar that's about waist height with your legs extended so you form a straight line from your head to your heels. Grip the bar tightly and brace your entire body as you pull your chest toward the bar. Lower yourself back to the bottom with control. Like the push-up, be careful not to bend your hips during this exercise.

2 sets x 10 reps



5. Beginner Bridge

Lie face-up on the ground with your hands by your sides and your knees bent so your feet are flat on the floor. Push your heels into the ground to bridge your hips up, forming a straight line from your knees to your chest. Clasp your hands, lift your chest and squeeze your shoulder blades together. Hold this position for time.

3 sets x 30 second hold



6. Hanging Knee Raise

While hanging from a pull-up bar with an overhand grip, slowly bend your knees and tuck your legs toward your chest. Carefully lower them back to a full extension, being mindful not to swing or create momentum.

2 sets x 10 reps





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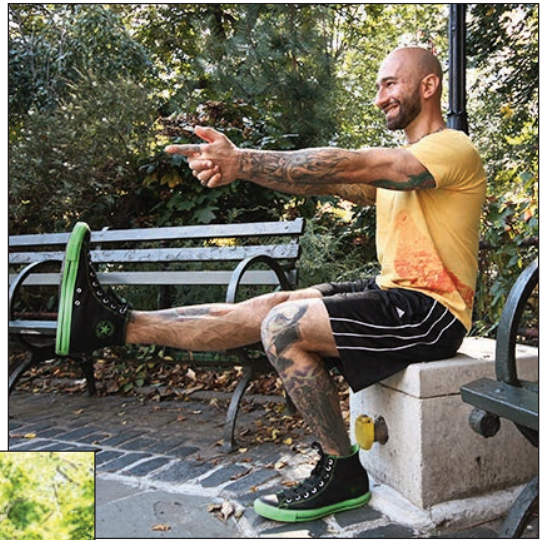
NYPD

SAMPLE WORKOUT #2 - BODYWEIGHT BARON

1. Single-leg Bench Squat

Stand with your back facing a bench or other object that is about knee height. Reach one leg into the air and slowly sit back onto the bench on just the other leg. You'll likely lose control at the bottom the first time—this is fine. Plop down on the bench if you have to, then squeeze your abs (and your whole body) as you reach your arms out in front and pitch yourself forward to get up. Repeat for ten repetitions, then switch legs.

2 sets x 20 reps (10 consecutive reps each leg)



2. Straight Bridge (Reverse Plank)

Sit on the floor with your legs extended straight in front of you and your palms on the ground just outside your hips. Press your hands into the floor and lift yourself up by contracting your hamstrings, glutes and other posterior musculature. Drop your head back, press your chest up and try to look behind you. You'll wind up looking like an upside-down plank. Lower back to the start position and repeat.

2 sets x 10 reps



3. Hanging Leg Raise

Hang from an overhead bar with your elbows straight and palms facing forward. Engage your abs as you lift your legs up, keeping your knees straight. When your toes are higher than your belly button, slowly lower your legs to the bottom and repeat.

3 sets x 5 reps

4. Parallel Bar Dip

Begin by holding yourself upright between a pair of parallel bars. Brace your torso as you bend your elbows, allowing your chest and shoulders to come in front of your hands as you lower yourself until reaching at least a ninety degree angle at the elbows. Press yourself back to the top and repeat.

2 sets x 10 reps



5. Pull-up

Grasp an overhead bar with your palms facing away from your body. Brace your trunk and avoid shrugging your shoulders as you bend your arms and pull your chest toward the bar. Lower yourself back down with control and repeat.

3 sets x 5 reps

6. Side-to-side “Archer” Push-up

Begin with your hands much wider than you would for a standard push-up, then slide yourself toward one side while keeping your opposite arm straight. Push yourself back to the center and then go to the other side. The movement of an archer push-up goes from side to side as well as up and down.

The position you’ll find yourself in at the bottom should look almost like an archer drawing a bow and arrow. Feel free to play around with gradually moving your arms out farther on each rep to allow for a full range of motion. This is one of the first techniques you can use to eventually build toward a one arm push-up.

2 sets x 10 reps (5 on each side, alternating sides)



SAMPLE WORKOUT #3 - BODYWEIGHT BEAST

1. Skin the Cat

Hang from an overhead bar and pull your knees all the way toward your chest. When you can't get them any higher, begin rotating your body around the bar so your legs and feet pass behind it on the other side. Now lower yourself into a deep hang and hold the stretch for a moment before returning to the start position by threading your legs back around beneath the bar. 2 sets x 5 reps



2. Side-to-side “Archer” Pull-up

Grab a straight pull-up bar with your hands a few inches wider than standard position. Keep one arm straight as you pull your body toward the opposite hand. The hand of your straight arm may need to open and roll over the bar at the top of the range of motion. Brace your trunk as you return to the bottom and repeat the move on the opposite side.

3 sets x 6 reps (3 on each side, alternating sides)

3. Handstand Push-up

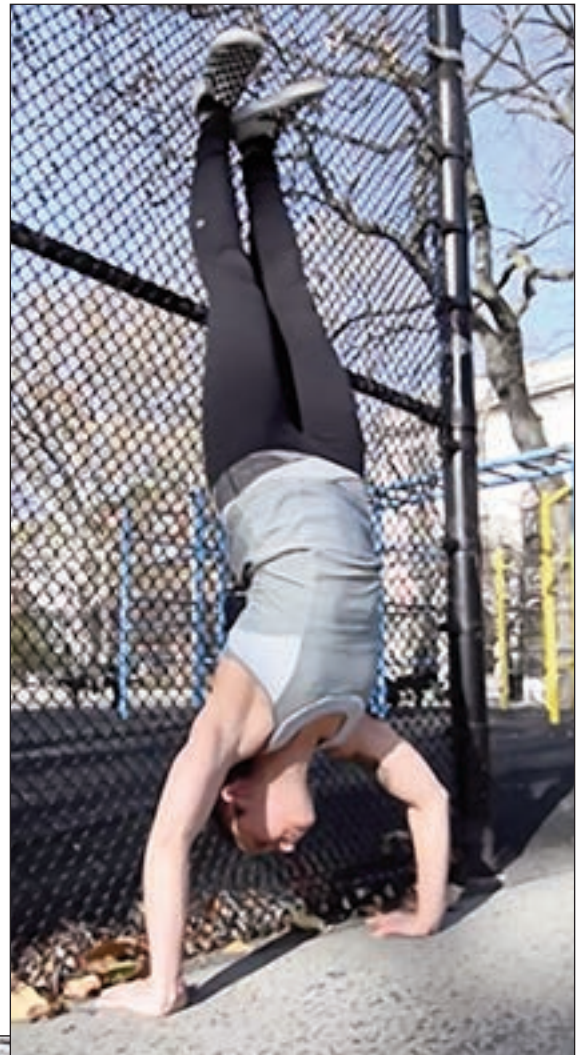
Kick up into a handstand with your feet resting on a wall or other sturdy object and your chest facing out. Look in between your hands as you carefully lower your nose toward the floor. Press yourself back to the top position and repeat.

3 sets x 8 reps

4. Pistol Squat

From a standing position, reach one leg into the air with your knee straight, then squat down as low as possible on your standing leg. Pause briefly at the bottom, then tense your abs and stand back up to the top position. In addition to the strength component, this can be a big stretch for your hips and hamstrings. Start by holding onto a sturdy object for support and pulling with your arms for assistance if necessary.

3 sets x 8 reps per leg



5. Muscle-up

The muscle-up begins similar to a pull-up but continues until your entire upper-body comes up over the bar, not just your chin. It takes a lot of practice to get the timing and technique down for the muscle-up. Refer to the section on muscle-ups in Part II for more info.

3 sets x 5 reps

6. Full Back Bridge

Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Place your hands next to your head, palms down, with your fingers pointed toward your shoulders. Press into the floor with your hands and feet, arching your back to press your chest forward and hips into the air. Keep your thighs, glutes and back muscles active to avoid putting excessive pressure on your spine. Hold this position for 30 seconds, then come down, rest and repeat.

3 sets x 30 seconds





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Al Kavadlo is one of the world's foremost experts on bodyweight strength training and calisthenics. A veteran of the fitness industry, Al has been featured in the New York Times and is a regular contributor to Bodybuilding.com and TRAIN magazine. As lead instructor for Dragon Door's Progressive Calisthenics Certification, Al has traveled the world teaching people from all walks of life about bodyweight strength training with minimal equipment. Though never incarcerated, Kavadlo is known for his appearance in the infamous Convict Conditioning book series. Outside of fitness, Al's interests include facial hair, tattoo collecting and rock music.



Also available by Al Kavadlo:

Stretching Your Boundaries — Flexibility Training for Extreme Calisthenic Strength
(Dragon Door Publications, 2014)

Pushing The Limits! — Total Body Strength With No Equipment
(Dragon Door Publications, 2013)

Raising The Bar — The Definitive Guide to Pull-up Bar Calisthenics
(Dragon Door Publications, 2012)

We're Working Out! — A Zen Approach to Everyday Fitness
(Fitedia, 2010)

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I can't give enough thanks to the man, the myth, the legend, Paul Wade, for always believing in me and helping to spread the word about my teachings. Thanks, Coach!

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Thanks to Andrew Tanner for suggesting the title *Zen Mind, Strong Body*. I went with it!

Last but definitely not least, thanks to all of you who took the time to read this book! Now go do some push-ups!

We're Working Out!



Stretching and Flexibility Secrets To Help Unlock Your Body—Be More Mobile, More Athletic, More Resilient And Far Stronger...

“The ultimate bodyweight mobility manual is here! Al Kavadlo’s previous two Dragon Door books, *Raising the Bar* and *Pushing the Limits*, are the most valuable bodyweight strength training manuals in the world. But strength without mobility is meaningless. Al has used his many years of training and coaching to fuse bodyweight disciplines such as yoga, martial arts, rehabilitative therapy and bar athletics into the ultimate calisthenics stretching compendium. *Stretching your Boundaries* belongs on the shelf of any serious athlete—it’s bodyweight mobility dynamite!”

—“COACH” PAUL WADE, author of *Convict Conditioning*

“In this book, Al invites you to take a deeper look at the often overlooked, and sometimes demonized, ancient practice of static stretching. He wrestles with many of the questions, dogmas and flat out lies about stretching that have plagued the fitness practitioner for at least the last decade. And finally he gives you a practical guide to static stretching that will improve your movement, performance, breathing and life. In *Stretching Your Boundaries*, you’ll sense Al’s deep understanding and love for the human body. Thank you Al, for helping to bring awareness to perhaps the most important aspect of physical education and fitness.”

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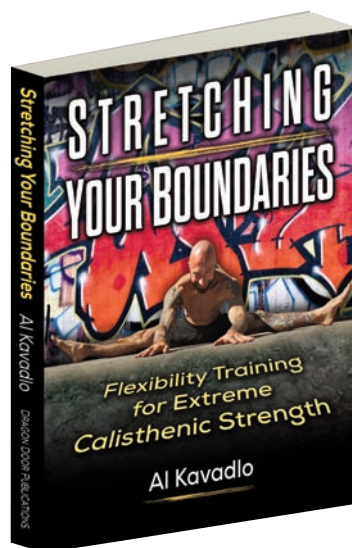
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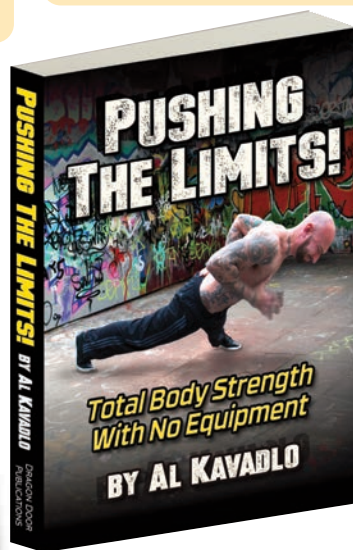
some. The proof is evident on every page of *Pushing the Limits!*

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“Raising the Bar is very likely the most important book on strength and conditioning to be published in the last fifty years. If you only ever get your hands on one training manual in your life, make it this one. Buy it, read it, use it. This book has the power to transform you into the ultimate bar athlete.” — Paul “Coach” Wade, author of *Convict Conditioning*

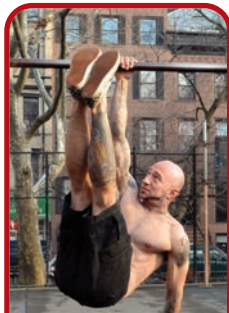
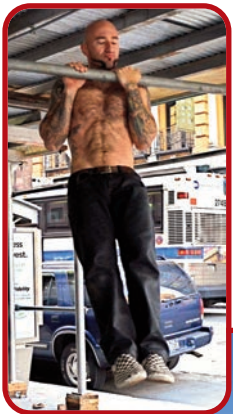
Raising the Bar breaks down every type of exercise you can do with a pull-up bar. From the basic two arm hang, to the mighty muscle-up, all the way to the elusive one arm pull-up, “bar master” Al Kavadlo takes you step by expert step through everything you need to do to build the chiseled frame you’ve always wanted.

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A Kick Ass Encyclopedia of Bodyweight Exercises

“Al Kavadlo has put together a kick ass encyclopedia of the most powerful and most commonly used bodyweight exercises amongst the various groups of bodyweight masters.

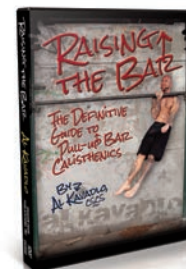
From the most simple form of each exercise progressing to the most challenging form of each exercise, Al covers it. As a Coach and bodyweight training addict I loved all the variations shown. This book is far beyond just pull ups and there are countless exercises for upper body and abs. Al covers what is probably EVERY exercise he knows of, uses and teaches others, breaking down proper techniques, regressions and progressions. This is HUGE for the trainers out there who do NOT know how to adapt bodyweight exercises to each individual’s fitness level.

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When he noted that he drank whiskey while getting his abs into his all time best shape, it sealed the deal for me. Oh, and the ab exercises are excellent."

—**MARTY GALLAGHER**, 3-Time Powerlifting Champion, Author of **The Purposeful Primitive**

"Danny's new book definitely hits the mark. **Diamond-Cut Abs** outlines pretty much everything you'd ever need to know about building the best midsection your genetic potential allows for and without the need for any equipment. Keep up the great work, Danny!"

—**BJ GADDOUR**, CSCS, author of **Men's Health Your Body is Your Barbell**, CEO of **StreamFIT.com**

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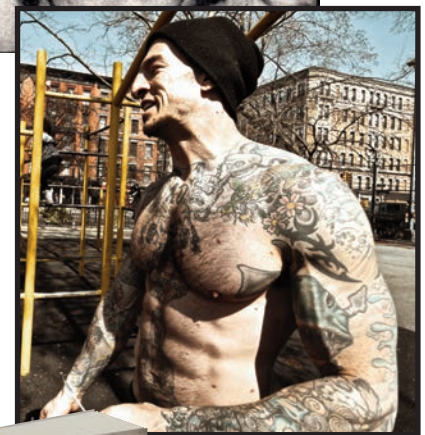
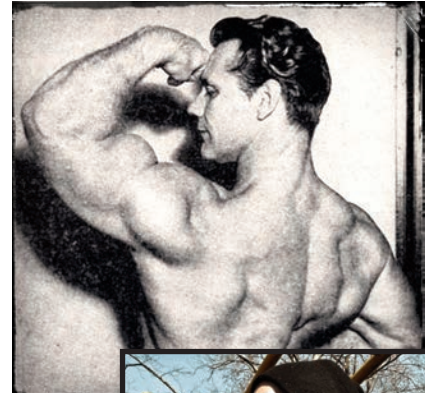
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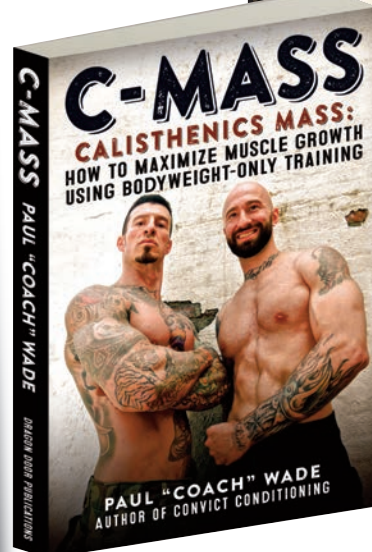
Paul Wade's trenchant, visceral style blazes with hard-won body culture insight, tactics, strategies and tips for the ultimate blueprint for getting huge naturally without free weights, machine supplements or—God forbid—steroids. With *C-Mass*, *Paul Wade* further cements his position as the preeminent modern authority on how to build extraordinary power and strength with bodyweight exercise only.



**ABSOLUTELY EXCELLENT READ,
GREAT INFORMATION—10/10**

Convict Conditioning was a watershed moment for me. Standing out as the best of an excellent library of Dragon Door books, applying the lessons of this book resulted in the greatest progress in my 20+ years of training. I was amazed as I performed my first pistol squat, first one-arm push-up, and recently, at the age of 37, my first one-arm chin-up. Before CC, I couldn't even control the negative portion of any of those exercises. I was hooked on Paul Wade's knowledge and conversational writing style. As a fitness trainer, I used the exercise progressions with my clients and watched them achieve strength and body control they wouldn't have thought possible. *Convict Conditioning 2* was, again, excellent. However, *C-Mass* is, in my opinion, Wade's best work ever. It's a book I wish I would've had as a kid when I did my first push-up. If I were to recommend just one book on muscle building, it would be this one. Why? For a few dollars, a trainee can change the appearance (and functionality) of his/her body without ever spending another dime. No gym memberships, weights, equipment, supplements or anything else is necessary, and Wade will tell you exactly why. Most importantly, he discusses the differences between training for max strength and training for hypertrophy and shows exactly how to steer towards the specific goals of each individual. His minimalist approach and entertaining writing resonate with me like no other fitness author ever has. I purchased this book two days ago and have already read it twice. Can't wait to buy and highlight the paperback.

—Dave Dellacroce / Philadelphia, PA, USA



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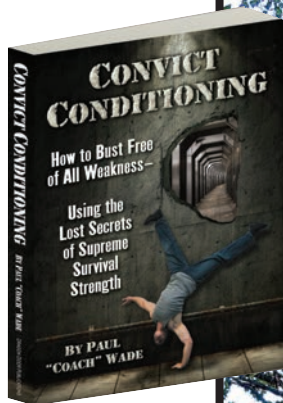


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