

POWER SURGE

Long hours in the office can kill a physique. But all it takes to get back in shape is some heavy lifting on creative machinery—and 30 minutes a week. No joke.

By Michael Mraz



The XN-TRX was developed to maximize a man's genetic potential—and minimize his gym time; xn-trx.com.

On a weekend in the Catskills celebrating my birthday, I had an unwelcome revelation: I, the former college athlete with a healthy ego, was in the worst physical shape of my life. I played tennis with my back to the net, vainly chasing after gimmes. Out on the links I drove the fairways time and time again—three holes away. The badminton match Sunday evening proved a shuttlecock could cause bodily harm.

How could this be? Had marriage softened me? I couldn't blame my wife—she trounced me at tennis, too. Long hours at the office and endless travel had robbed me of the 90 minutes a day I used to spend at the gym four times a week. Working out had been sacked by working.

It was only fitting, then, that my boss—perhaps out of pity—told me about high intensity training (HIT), a form of strength building that contends it's not the volume of one's workouts that matters but the ferocity. "It's amazing," he said, explaining that, along with weekly squash matches for cardio, he trains only once a week for less than 30 minutes. Impossible, I thought.

HIT was developed in the 1970s by an eccentric inventor named Arthur Jones, who created the Nautilus exercise machines and is rumored to always travel with a .357 Magnum. Reading the rapturous praise of Jones's devotees made me think of Alvy Singer's line: "I can't get with any religion that advertises in *Popular Mechanics*." But my boss insisted that in just a couple of months he'd already noticed the sleeves of his suits fitting more snugly. Desperate, I arranged to meet with Jim Clarry, his trainer and a HIT specialist.

Jim, who works at Ultimate Training Center in New York, is not your typical no-neck gym rat. He's soft-spoken and intelligent and may be the only trainer I've ever met without a buzz cut—a preppy 38-year-old father of two as equipped to talk about meiosis and mitosis as crunches and curls. Ultimate Training is not your typical gym, either: It's a trainer-only facility, so there are never pools of people jockeying for the same dumbbell. You pay per session, and the fee (around \$90) ensures that you'll show up and get your money's worth. But the thing that really sets it apart is the Midtown businessmen who come to train in their suits, doffing only their jackets and ties, and the exquisitely kept wives working out in dresses, kicking aside their heels and going barefoot. In shorts and a T-shirt at my first session, I feel like an imposter—it's the only time I've ever felt underdressed to lift weights. But when your workout is shorter than the wait for a treadmill at most gyms, why bother changing clothes?

With a stopwatch hanging from his neck and a clipboard in hand, Jim takes me through a beginner's workout, explaining the mechanics of each exercise in detail. "For the first couple sessions we're just going to let your body adjust to the negative-only motions," he explains. I have no idea what "negative-only" means, so we start with one-arm cable bicep curls to illustrate. Take a conventional bicep curl—you start with the bar down at your thigh and squeeze until it reaches your shoulder. That's a concentric, or positive, contraction. The second act, when you extend your arm, controlling the weight back to its starting position, is an eccentric, or negative, contraction. Jim explains that, like journalists, we are only



concerned with the negatives. Then the laughing stops: He pulls the weight (100 pounds, much more than I'd be able to do with a positive contraction) up for me so that I'm starting with it already at my shoulder. This is amazing, I think. He's doing all the work. Then Jim lets go, and I am left resisting with all my might as the weight forces my arm to extend downward. "That's it," he says cheerfully, as the pain builds. "Super strong.???. Barely let it tap." A rep's ideal duration is three to six seconds, or about the time it takes to run a 40-yard dash—full-out exertion. I'm finished after four reps, my biceps taxed to the point that simply lifting a hand is difficult.

There are a few other exercises—shoulder presses, leg presses, and chest flies—all negative only. We do just four to five reps, but after the first of each I'm struggling. By the end, I'm completely spent, my ears clogged as if I'm on a flight that's taking off. Jim says it's just an effect of circulation and quick-tempo breathing. "We're lengthening those muscles with maximum resistance," he says, explaining that the goal is not just to fatigue the muscle or see how much weight I can manage but to create "micro-tears"—multiple microscopic tears on the muscle fiber, which occur more numerous during negative-only motions. "Think of a fixed rope with a lot of weight on one end. Tiny strands are going to break away as it holds that weight up. The rope is your muscle." You only train once a week or so because your muscles need time to repair and regenerate, flushing out waste product and growing bigger and stronger than before.

After 25 minutes, mercifully, we're finished. I'm tired but not exhausted, and feel like I can—and should—go on. "Part of the conditioning," Jim points out, "is to realize that you shouldn't work out until you feel like you can't. It's about maximizing the intensity and decreasing the frequency." Then he appraises me with disarming objectiveness. Taking into account my size—six foot four, 215 pounds—he says, "You have good bone structure, good long muscle bellies.

I'd say you can reach your genetic potential in less than two years and put on 20 to 30 pounds of muscle." He tells me about the Colorado Experiment, in which Arthur Jones trained Casey Viator, the youngest man ever to be named Mr. America, with negative-only HIT. In 28 days Viator put on 63 pounds of muscle. Of course, I'm not looking to become a meathead. But if I were to add just 5 to 10 pounds, I'd be converting part of my weight from fat to muscle, which would raise my metabolism enough to burn more calories in between visits.

At my next two sessions the intensity increases. The most difficult stations, by far, are the chin-ups and dips. In most gyms there's a chin-up machine with a pad for you to rest your knees on, and as you pull it seesaws you up, bearing some of the load. Jim's version is the exact opposite—he straps a 60-pound belt around my waist. I walk up three stairs, hold my chin above the bar, step off, then free-hang with an overweight child clinging to me. "Hold it," Jim preposterously instructs, eyeing his stopwatch as I try to slow my plummet. "You're hanging off a cliff." Later I realize that I had been wrong about the chin-ups. The most difficult bit comes afterward when I'm changing back into my suit—I still haven't adopted the HIT dress code yet—and try to fix my tie with arms I can see but can't feel.

By my next visit, working legs and back, I have reason to believe this is more than a weekly ritual for masochists. Putting the pin in at 480 pounds as I slip into the seated row machine, Jim tells me he's increasing the weight almost 150 pounds from my first session. "You see," he says, "we're almost out of weight. That's the problem with using conventional equipment." That's easily solved: On certain exercises—like the leg presses and chest flies—after I bring the weight up to the starting position, Jim hops onto the stack to add another 195 pounds. My thighs feel like they're being soldered together. My progress chart now says "360 pounds + Jim" for leg press. You can safely manage 40 percent more weight with negative than positive exercises. At worst, if I reached true exhaustion, the stack—and Jim and his clipboard—would crash to the floor. If anyone is in danger, he is.

To solve the problems that conventional equipment poses, Jim and his partner, Randy Rindfleisch, formerly Mr. Wisconsin, have patented their own invention: a new line called XN-TRX (as in eccentric contraction), specifically engineered for negative-only exercises. Jim tells me he has two prototypes in the garage of his North Fork home, so I head out early one morning, half-expecting a device resembling a torture rack from Saddam's bag of tricks.

The machines are massive, sophisticated pieces of equipment, nearly filling Jim's three-car garage—it's as if Richard Serra designed the next generation of Nautilus. In the city, Jim had to raise the weight before each rep; here all he has to do is man one of the two large levers, on which he can easily apply or release resistance. Sheri, Jim's friendly, diminutive wife, takes him through his workouts, for Jim is not only the president of XN-TRX, he is also a client. "I've been doing this for 22 years and I thought I'd reached my genetic potential, which was pretty lame. But since working out on this I've added nine pounds of muscle." (Randy tells me his weekly workouts on the XN-TRX take less than four minutes. "People are reluctant to believe it.")

Seven weeks later, I am no longer reluctant. After no more than 50 minutes a week with Jim (about six hours total—far less than a day's work), I've put on six pounds of muscle, dropped half an inch off my waist, and no longer fear the sting of the shuttlecock. At a recent benefit, my wife and I ran into a bunch of friends we hadn't seen in a while. She spent most of the night proudly telling them about my transformation, while their husbands and boyfriends listened in with undisguised contempt. Giving my bicep a furtive squeeze, one wife said, "Are you flexing? He's not flexing!" I told them about Jim and his clipboard, about Mr. Wisconsin, about overworked guys who no longer have the time to work out. I was proselytizing, on a mission to save marriages, to rekindle relationships, to improve men's health. The guys, now starry-eyed, asked, "So just four minutes a week, huh?"