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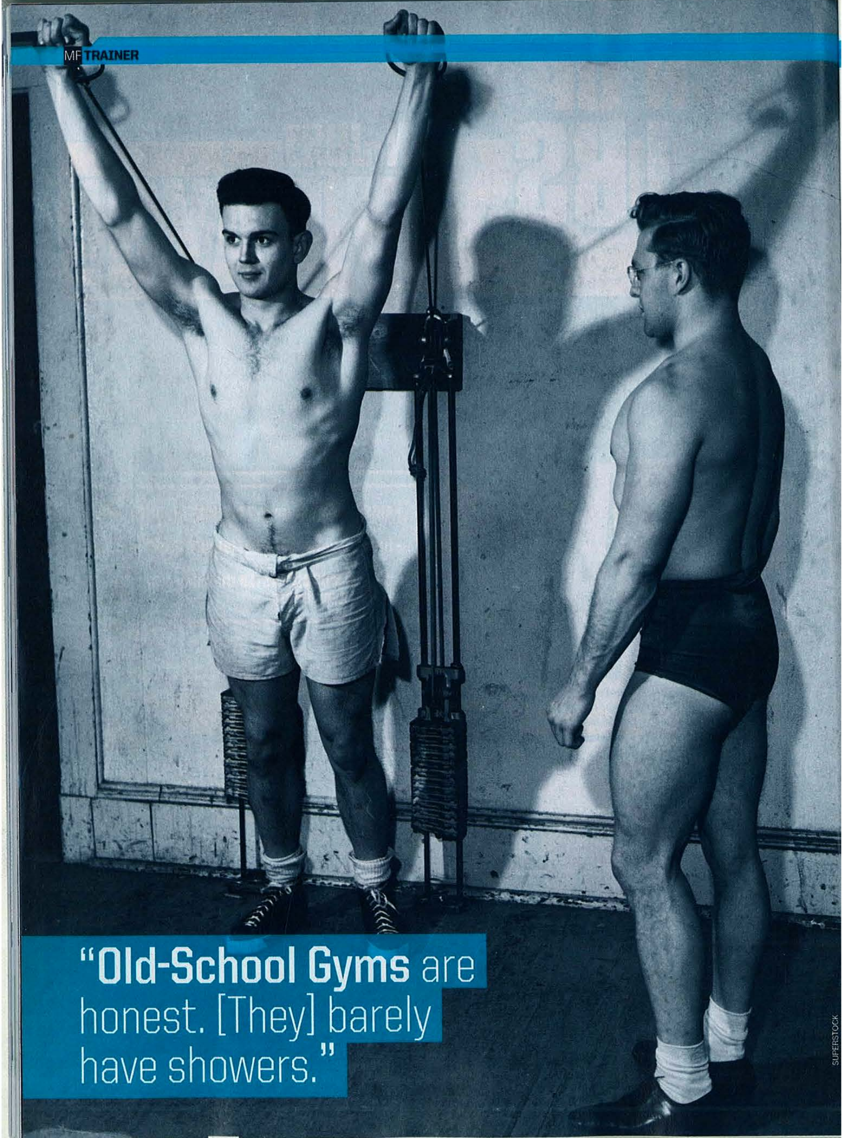
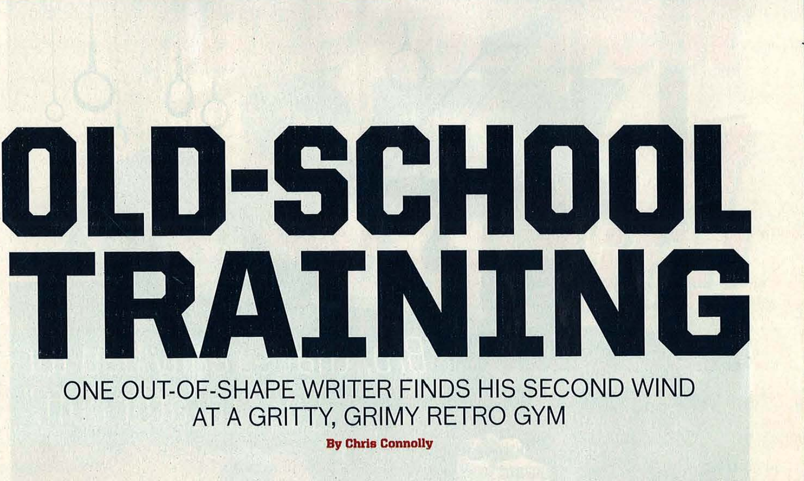


SUPERSTOCK

"**Old-School Gyms** are honest. [They] barely have showers."



OLD-SCHOOL TRAINING

ONE OUT-OF-SHAPE WRITER FINDS HIS SECOND WIND AT A GRITTY, GRIMY RETRO GYM

By Chris Connolly

My gym could beat up your gym. No, seriously. My gym could take your gym, pull its underpants over its head, and stuff it in a locker. My gym is Old School.

Are you familiar with the Old-School Gym? You may not be. In a world dominated by 24-hour fitness mills, Old-School Gyms, featuring hardcore training and really heavy weights, are dying out. Mine is called Ford's, and it's a beautiful place in Madison, Wis., held together by trainer's tape and sweat.

These are the kind of places where weight training was born. And while they've embraced certain modern fitness ideas—stretching, for example, and drinking water—they haven't lost touch with weight training's very brutish founding principle: If you pick up something heavy enough times, it will eventually start to feel lighter.

I prefer the Old-School Gym to the health club. I recognize that health clubs have tremendous value—they've made fitness available to the masses. But they always make me feel like I'm being lied to. Health clubs sell the idea that fitness can be easy; that if a machine has enough features, it will do the work for you. This is false. Fact is, 300 pounds is 300 pounds. And 300 pounds does not care whether or not there are baskets of warm towels at your feet and a *Gilmore Girls* marathon on the flat-screen TV across the room.

Old-School Gyms are honest. Old-School Gyms don't try to tell you having apricot foot scrub in the shower will make everything all right. Hell, Old-School Gyms barely have showers. They embrace the concept of hard and savor every agonizing rep.

Winds of Change

The difference between these approaches meant everything to me when I found Ford's. I moved to Madison from California about a year ago and immediately discovered that I was severely allergic to something in the air here. In California, I surfed every day and played in soccer leagues four nights a week. In Madison, simply climbing a flight of stairs would leave me gasping for air and seeing stars.

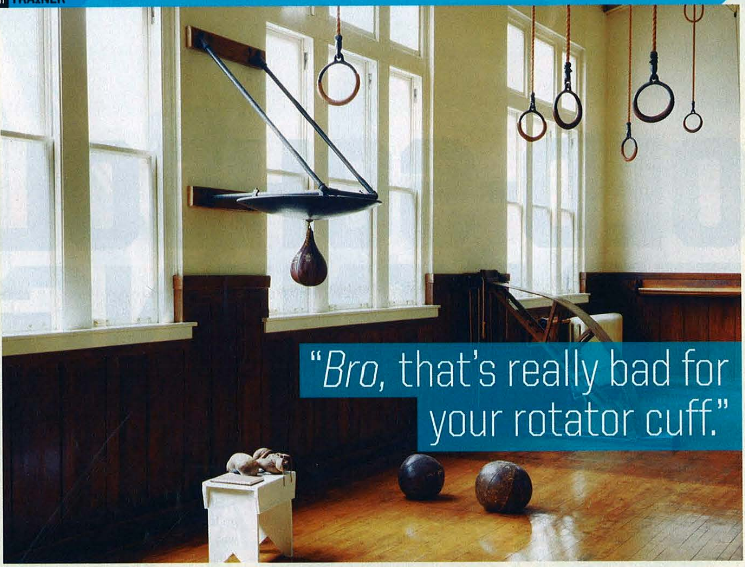
Being a typical dumbass guy, I didn't go to the doctor. I figured the problem was seasonal and would clear up when the temperature dropped. In the meantime, there was so much to do: a new house to maintain and a new town to explore. I wheezed away the days.

One day in late fall, I was out in front of the house. It was a glorious day, like someone had taken the October page out of a calendar and brought it to life on my lawn. I should have been bursting with joy; instead, I was doubled over trying not to pass out.

I had only been raking the leaves.

The next day, I finally went to the doctor. He told me I was only breathing at 40% of my natural capacity and handed me a flat purple disc (an asthma medication inhaler) that changed my life overnight—literally.

That night, I slept soundly for the first time in months. The next day, although my breathing was still ragged, simple physical tasks were no longer a humiliating impossibility. I took an eight-mile walk, and along my route I discovered an Old-School Gym called Ford's.



"*Bro,* that's really bad for your rotator cuff."

Second Wind

The minute I saw Ford's, I knew it was the place for me. I'd put on about 35 pounds, which was going to make it very hard to get back in shape. I could breathe now, yes, but I couldn't simply hop on my bike and ride myself back to fitness. I needed to join a gym. The problem was, gyms and I have never gotten along. The last gym I belonged to was an archetypal massive health club in Manhattan. I went there exactly three times: once to sign up, once to work out, and once because I was shopping in the area and wanted to use a clean bathroom. The lone time I did work out there, I was driven to distraction by a swarm of personal trainers. Like gnats with water bottles and tank tops, they buzzed around trying to sign up clients. I was doing a set of overhead barbell presses when some douche interjected "Bro, that's really bad for your rotator cuff. Pronate your wrist." Why don't you pronate your face, Muscles McGee?

To me, the lifting of weights is supposed to hurt. Look, when Conan was pushing the Wheel of Pain, was anyone telling him to lift with his knees?

As soon as I entered Ford's, I could tell it was the kind of place where people left you alone. In fact, I suspected if I tried a set of overhead presses using only my rotator cuffs, not only would no one object, they might actually cheer. I signed up on the spot.

Gonna Fly Now

The first time I worked out at Ford's was intimidating. Here I was, a wheezy turd, walking into a land of hard men. Remember in *Rocky III* when Rocky has lost the eye of the tiger and Apollo takes him to that L.A. hellhole to rediscover it? It could have been filmed at Ford's.

I've always embraced the idea that fitness is hard, but Ford's was *hard*. There were StairMasters and an elliptical machine, but they were pushed off

FROM TOP: MITCH EPSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES; DAN BIGELOW/GETTY IMAGES

into their own corner, huddling together as if in fear of the other equipment. The rest of the machines were stone-cold analog: a bank of exercise bikes, which relied on huge-bladed fans to produce resistance, and a boxing ring downstairs shrouded by a cluster of ancient, tape-patched heavy bags that swayed with burly menace.

There was strongman equipment: A series of increasingly heavy stones sat atop barrels daring you to budge them, and a massive log with handles chopped into it hunkered on a platform. In one corner was a tangled collection of chains, pipes, and sledgehammers, which seemed better suited to a rumble than a workout, and perched crookedly above the hardware was a boom box with a wire hanger antenna.

I grabbed some heavy dumbbells and started doing shrugs. Mid-set, someone flipped on the radio: "Eye of the Tiger." Perfect.

Grizzly Ben of the Hills

I found the vein-popping atmosphere at Ford's motivational. Ford's does not tolerate shirkers. When the guy next to you is repping 350 pounds on the incline bench, it tends to make you swap that 5-pound plate for a 10, at least. When you're wondering whether to do another set of squats and you look up and see some guy walking up and down the stairs with a 125-pound dumbbell in each hand—you know, the red ones at the far end of the rack where most men dare not tread?—you slap those plates on and get to squattin'.

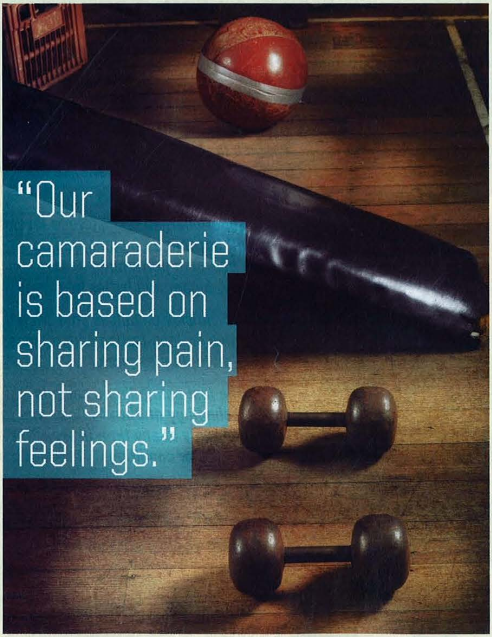
One of my favorite regulars is a guy I call Grizzly Ben of the Hills. I do not know his real name, or whether he does, in fact, live in the hills. But I do know this: Grizzly Ben is roughly 60 and looks like he's been working out for 58 years. He has a massive beard, a huge belly, and he exercises in jeans, boots, and about four sweatshirts.

The first time I saw Grizzly Ben, he walked in, plunked down his card, and immediately got into an impassioned tug-of-war with the pulldown machine. He racked the entire stack, then, using his whole body, ripped the bar to his chest. Once he got it there, he released the tension and let the stack drop, yanking him violently off the seat. Just before the plates crashed down, he heaved the bar back to his chest. He repeated this process until the apparatus was rocking so badly he had to stop or risk it tumbling on top of him.

As I watched Grizzly Ben put on this almost-frightening display of weight-shifting power and abominable exercise form, I imagined some spandex-clad personal trainer sauntering up and saying something to him about rotator cuffs. Grizzly Ben wouldn't even stop working out. He'd just take one hand off the bar, eat the guy, and get back to his routine. As well he should.

Kinship Over Friendship

I became part of the landscape at Ford's. I transitioned from a "Who the hell is that guy?" to an "Oh, it's *that* guy." Ford's values kinship over friendship. Our camaraderie is based on



"Our camaraderie is based on sharing pain, not sharing feelings."

CORBIS

"Come on, Jerry! Big lift!"

sharing pain, not sharing feelings.

Ford's contains a set of powerlifting platforms that represent a kind of VIP area. One afternoon, I was working on a squat rack near these platforms when one of Ford's dominant males, Jerry, walked in. He has reddish hair, wears powerlifting gear, and looks like Obelix from the Asterix comic books. He strode onto the central platform, did a few deep knee bends, and then spent the next several minutes piling a ponderous amount of weight onto the bar for squats. Jerry dipped his hands into a bowl of chalk and sent a cloud of dust billowing through the air. Suddenly, silently, everyone in the big weight room left his apparatus and gathered around to cheer.

"Come on, Jerry! Big lift!"

"Big push, Jerry! Let's go!"

Jerry gave a yell, ducked under the rack, and shouldered the load. With the bar bending sickly, he sank into a deep squat, exploded upward, racked the bar, turned red, and fell down.

The place went nuts!

"All right, Jerry!"

"Big lift! Big lift! Way to go!"

Regaining his feet, Jerry saluted his supporters and headed to the locker room. He was done for the day.

What a great way to work out, I thought. Instead of performing numerous reps with smaller weights over a long period of time, Jerry pops in, lifts the sum total weight of a normal person's entire workout in one shot, and then goes to eat. Probably beef. Raw.

Tough Love

Obviously, the Jerry Program is not for everyone. Neither are Old-School Gyms. Then again, neither are fancy health clubs and "fitness centers."

Maybe you're able to exercise while watching *Project Runway* in glorious HDTV. I find it distracting. (What was he thinking with that neckline?!?) Maybe you can squat with Jessica Simpson playing (but then I bet you can't squat much). The stripped down, focused environment at Ford's forces me to push myself, and I've made strides there I never would have at another facility.

I've lost weight, put on muscle, and regained most of my wind. I can ride my bike now, play basketball, and take a vengeful pleasure in raking the shit out of my leaves. After drifting for months in a fog of wheezing, I finally found a place to catch my breath—the air tasted of sweat and iron.

For me, the key to making workouts easy was making them hard. If you feel the same way, you might want to look into an Old-School Gym. The members may not welcome you with open arms, but don't worry. It's only because they can't lift them that high. MF

MATTHIAS TUNGER/GETTY IMAGES