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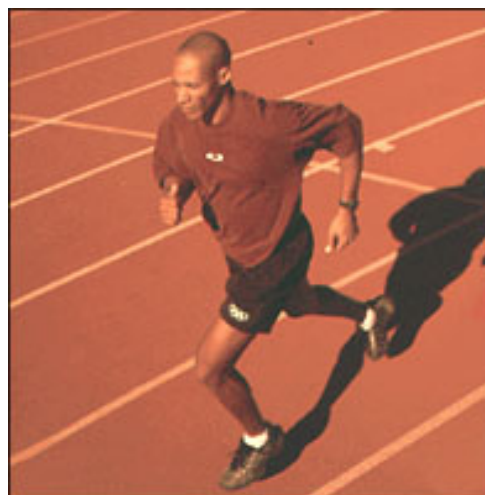
Outside magazine, January 1999

From Spud to Stud

Feeling fit? Bravo. But becoming a graceful, well-rounded athlete is an entirely different ball game.

By Paul Keegan

"I have a lot of friends who are strong and who train hard," says Chris Huffins. "But they're not in shape." At least not to his way of thinking. The 28-year-old national-champion decathlete doesn't intend this as an insult. He simply means that the average duffer is missing something: the ability to jump higher, run faster, coordinate wayward hands and feet, and move with the ease and grace of a dancer. In a word, athleticism.



Chris Huffins

It's a worthy goal, to be sure. And just as sure is that there are few folks better qualified to guide you than Huffins. The 6-foot-3, 193-pound Wake Forest University sprinting coach is the odds-on favorite to break Dan O'Brien's world decathlon record of 8,891 points. More important, his stock-in-trade requires precisely the set of skills — running, jumping, and throwing — needed to transform you into a superlative all-around athlete. As a careful student of the powerful moves demanded by his smorgasbord of events, Huffins works out no less than six or seven hours a day. The price he asks of you, however, is considerably more modest: adding two one-hour sessions per week to the three-day periodized program you've been following since October.

Yes, we're asking for time on five separate days of your already

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busy week. But at the end of this intense month — the fourth of our five-part series, in which you'll also be entering the power phase of your resistance training and the speed segment of your cardiovascular regimen ([see "January: Picking Up the Pace"](#)) — you're in for some fitting rewards. Huffins's installment will give you a level of quickness you haven't known for years and a command of your body's movements that you may never have known at all. Both of which are sure to come in handy when you next find yourself slaloming a mountain bike through an aspen-crowded trail or trying an Allan Iverson stutter-step en route to the hoop. Indeed, you may find yourself digging out moves you haven't tried since you were a cocky kid of 16.

More Is Better

The secret to becoming a sharper athlete is in improving what exercise physiologists call "muscle recruitment." Most of us use only about 10 to 15 percent of the fiber in any given muscle for any given task. And while you can't use all your fibers all the time, you can call in extra troops for particularly demanding instances — when you need a flurry of tough moves to get past the crux of a climb or have to paddle frantically to stay upright through a monster hole. It's what we think of as power. "It's like suddenly giving your 12-valve engine 16 valves," Huffins explains. "Sure, spending some time in the weight room will make me a little stronger, and perhaps I'll be able to throw the discus a few inches farther. But if I can train my muscle fibers to work better together, well, then you're talking about improving not by inches, but by feet."

Specifically, the fibers you want to call into action are of the fast-twitch variety. Impossible, you say — everyone knows that whether you have a predominance of slow-twitch or fast-twitch fibers is a matter of genetics. True enough, but that's where recruitment comes into play: You can tap your fast-twitch potential by exercising in a certain way, like lifting weights with a fast thrust, as you'll be doing in the weight room this month. "Muscle recruitment is a learned response," says physiologist Donald Chu, a former consultant to members of the Chicago Bulls. "Without it you might be strong, but you won't jump as high or move as quickly."

While you're busy recruiting fast-twitch muscles, another physiological transformation is taking place. You're enhancing the efficiency between the neurotransmitters and the muscles, which helps coordinate your new, more powerful moves, thus improving balance and agility. "It's the motor pathways to the brain that tell the muscles what to do," Chu explains. "The point is to speed up the flow of sensory, perceptual information. It all happens at the speed of light and it seems like instinct, but what you're really doing is developing those instincts."

Huffins's Five-Dot Drill ([see "This, in Fact, Will Hurt a Bit"](#)), for example, may seem odd and even pointless while you're hopping from one spot to the next, as if engaged in a solo game of Twister. But you're actually programming your feet to perform intricate steps without thinking. "After a while it becomes rote," Huffins says, "and your feet will know exactly where to go."

Practice, Yes, but What Kind?

In creating his routine, Huffins has found that the most useful tool for this sort of development is plyometrics. Long a mainstay of elite track and alpine-skiing programs, the discipline includes exercises like jumping in place and heaving medicine balls, combining strength with speed and precision to produce power. "This stuff prepares you for any sport," Huffins says, "whether you've tried it or not."

Athletes who ignore plyometrics and work only on strength and endurance will be slow for the simple reason that they're training slowly. Plyometrics, however, pinpoints that most crucial juncture of any athletic movement: the transfer from the eccentric phase of muscle contraction (when a runner's foot hits the ground, for example) to the concentric stage (when the foot leaves the ground). These exercises can transform a slow, plodding step into a powerful explosion. "All great athletes are quick off the ground," points out Chu, who wrote the book on the subject, *Jumping into Plyometrics*. "If you can reduce your ground-contact time, you can develop more power."

This training is intense, however, and should only be done for short periods of time as you're gearing up for a fitness peak. Experts say you can expect to reach such a peak just three or four times a year. Trying to peak too often — or doing power exercises for longer than six weeks straight — puts you in danger of overtraining. You can actually lose fitness as your muscle tissues reach their failure point and the stress on your tendons and ligaments leaves them prone to tearing.

Huffins recommends performing his routine for three weeks, taking a week off to recover, and then following up with the same three-week burst of activity. You can maintain the peak you'll reach by returning to a normal strength and cardio routine until the next time you're ready to top out.

It's a strategy that's worked for Huffins, as well as for friends who've come to him with specific problems, like the college receiver who ran great pass-catching routes but was told he wouldn't make the NFL unless he lowered his time in the 40-yard dash. When Huffins got through with his pal (whom he declined to name, for obvious reasons), his time had dropped from 4.8 to 4.5

seconds. Huffins reports that he's now playing pro ball.

Where most people fall short, Huffins says, is in worrying too much about factors such as genetic limitations, past performance, or age. He believes such issues easily become excuses to avoid the hard work that can bring anyone to a new level of athleticism. Take age. "You may slow down a little as you get older, but for most people performance has nothing to do with age," he says. "It has to do with maintaining a certain level of physical activity. When I'm 40 years old, I expect to be able to do 95 percent of what I can do now. I may not be able to compete at a high level of decathlon, it's true. But I'll still be able to dunk a basketball."

Next month, in the fifth and final installment of our series, Paul Keegan will focus on how to maintain the fitness peak that you are — or should be — fast approaching.

January: Picking Up the Pace

While everyone else is blathering about new year's resolutions, you're way ahead of the pack, ready to focus on power and speed. In the weight room, Harvey Newton has you raising each load as fast as possible without jerking, and then lowering it over three seconds. On the first set lift 60 percent of what you did in the last workout, 90 percent during the third set, and anything in between for the middle set or sets.

On the cardio beat, Mondays are still for lactate threshold blocks. But Dave Scott — surely with a slide rule in hand — has made them even more complex: Warm up for 10 minutes at 8 on the perceived exertion scale, speed up to 15 for 90 seconds, 16 for 30 seconds, 17 for 30 seconds, and then recover for 20 seconds. Thursdays are for speed blocks: After the same warm-up, push it to 17 for the time allotted and then recover for one minute. On Saturdays, runners can proceed at an intensity of 12, while those favoring nonweight-bearing fun should divvy up their time thus: Warm up to 12, cruise at 15 for 20 minutes, drop back to 12 for 90 minutes, add another 20-minute stint at 15, and cool down for 10 minutes.

- **WEEK 14:** (M) CT-14(40), 6xLT, ST-A(3/6); (T) AT; (W) off; (Th) CT-12(20), 4xS-30, ST-B(3/6); (F) AT; (S) CT/LD (92/150); (Su) off
- **WEEK 15:** (M) CT-14(44), 7xLT, ST-A(4/6); (T) AT; (W) off; (Th) CT-12(20), 6xS-30, ST-B(4/6); (F) AT; (S) CT/LD (96/150); (Su) off

- **WEEK 16:** (M) CT-14(48), 8xLT, ST-A(5/6); (T) AT; (W) off; (Th) CT-12(22), 8xS-30, ST-B(5/6); (F) AT; (S) CT/LD 100/150); (Su) off
- **WEEK 17:** (M) CT-14(52), 9xLT, ST-A(6/6); (T) off; (W) off; (Th) CT-12(20), 4xS-60, ST-B(6/6); (F) off; (S) CT/LD (104/150); (Su) off

KEY

M = Monday, **T** = Tuesday, **W** = Wednesday, **Th** = Thursday, **F** = Friday, **S** = Saturday, **Su** = Sunday

CT-14 (40) = 40 minutes of cardiovascular training not to exceed 14 on Perceived Exertion Scale;

6 x LT = 6 lactate threshold blocks;

4 x S-30 = 4 sets of 30-second speed blocks;

CT/LD (92/150) = long-distance cardiovascular training. 92 minutes of weight-bearing exercise (jogging) or 150 minutes of nonweight-bearing exercise (cycling, swimming, nordic skiing);

AT = athleticism workout (see "This, in Fact, Will Hurt a Bit");

ST (3/6) = strength training: (3 sets of 6 reps): **A** = leg press, bench press, pull-ups; **B** = leg press, seated press, seated row.

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This, in Fact, Will Hurt a Bit

The champ's plan to get you to the next level

To hone your athletic prowess, Huffins suggests that you look inward — to your body's core. "If you can strengthen the muscles between the knees and shoulders," he says, "every athletic movement is enhanced, because they all start there." That's why his routine calls for, ahem, 500 crunches a session. Before you throw up your arms in defeat, bear in mind that this is merely a goal; Huffins fully expects you to roll over clutching your stomach before finishing. But eventually you'll get there. The same holds true for jump-rope skips — especially the one-leggers. On the athleticism day, complete the following regimen, first warming up for 10 minutes. Afterward, stretch for five minutes and cool down for another five.

Rope Skips

It's preferable to skip on grass, dirt, or a wood floor. Do 300 skips with both legs, 100 with the left leg, 100 with the right, and another 100 with both. If you can't finish a particular group, stop, rest, and then start up with the next (ditto crunches). Rest two minutes.

Elevated Ab Extensions

Lie on your back with your feet propped on a bench. Keeping your shoulders flat, bridge your body so it forms a plank. Hold the position for 30 seconds, and then drop down and rest for 30 seconds. Repeat five times.



Walking Lunges

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From a standing position, take a long stride forward with your left leg and dip down until your thigh is parallel to the floor. Be sure that the knee of your forward leg doesn't jut ahead of your toes. Now step your right leg forward in a mirror position, and continue until you've done 20. Rest one minute, repeat the set, and then

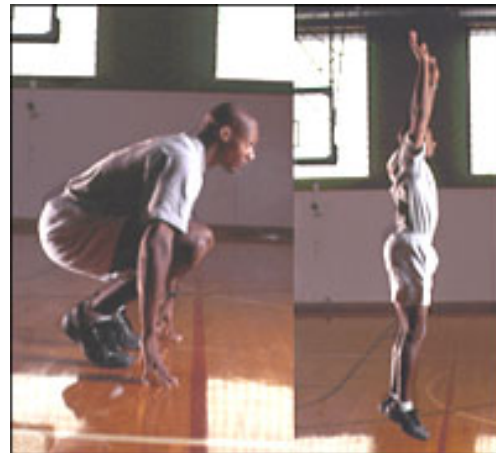
rest another minute before moving on. Huffins offers fair warning: "Your butt will feel like somebody's been hitting it with a jackhammer — especially the next day."

Jumping Knee Tucks

Stand and jump straight up, momentarily clutching your knees as close to your chest as possible. Land in the same spot and immediately take off again. Do three sets of 20 jumps, resting one minute between sets and two minutes after the last.

Burpies

From the same starting position as above, squat and steady yourself with your fingertips. Exploding with your legs and reaching skyward with your arms, jump up as high as you can. Land on the balls of your feet and quickly repeat. Do two sets of 15, resting two minutes between sets and two minutes afterward.



"Burpies," Huffins adds, "really suck."



Five-Dot Drill

Mark four spots to make a five-foot square on the floor, and then add a fifth in the center. Number them clockwise from the bottom left, with the "2" in the middle. For 30 seconds, hop dot-to-dot with both feet as follows: 1, 2, 3, 4, 2, 5. Repeat five times, resting 30 seconds between bouts and two minutes afterward. "Do them quickly, but not as fast as you can," says Huffins. "Make sure you get off the ground with five solid 'pops.'"

Crunches

Do four sets of 25, three sets of 50, two sets of 75, and one set of 100, resting 45 seconds between sets and two minutes between groups.

Double-Leg Hops

Standing with your feet together, hop forward as far as you can and then take off again in one smooth movement, continuing until you've completed ten. Do four sets, resting one minute between sets and two minutes afterward.

Pull-Ups

With an overhand grip that's just wider than your shoulders, try to do 20. Emphasis on "try."

Box-Top Intervals

Stand facing a two-foot-high box with your feet shoulder-width apart and, for 30 seconds, step onto it in the following pattern: left foot up, right foot up, left foot down, right foot down. Then rest 30 seconds and repeat for 30 seconds starting with the right foot. Rest 30 seconds and do another sequence in which you alternate your starting foot. This is a good drill to end on, says Huffins, because you'll have just enough leg strength left to hobble to the shower.

Photographs by Charles Harris

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