



By
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Photographs by
Benjamin Lowy

ONLY THE FIT SURVIVE

On the grappling grounds of one of the world's oldest wrestling championships, we found the keys to a battle-ready body. Do you want to get fighting fit?

The wrestlers enter the arena like gods. Oiled and glistening in the summer sun, they stride across the unkempt grass in thick buffalo-skin trunks, prodding roars from the crowd

as they greet each section of the stadium in turn. They deserve the applause, having endured days of punishing preliminary rounds that whittled a field of hundreds down to a handful. Now they are eager to continue their struggle. There's money to be won—lots of money—as well as honor and fame. And the victor will be draped in gold.

I've traveled more than 5,000 miles to experience the Kirkpınar, Turkey's premier sporting event, which also claims the distinction of being the longest-running sports competition in the world. Every summer for more than 650 years, the best grapplers in Turkey have gathered in the country's western borderland to battle for the title of *Baspehlivan* (champion) and the 14-karat-gold belt that goes with it. It's a tradition that has remained largely unchanged since its inception during the Ottoman Empire, and in a country racked by recent political turmoil, it's a welcome distraction.

The crowd crackles with anticipation as the wrestlers pair off, leaning in brow-to-brow to begin their brutal work. Much of the action is slow and deliberate, each grappler thinking several moves ahead in an effort to gain the upper hand. But every so often an athlete shifts into overdrive, whirling his rival into a lightning-quick takedown that fills the stadium with cheers.

"You want to know what functional strength is? You're looking at it," says Steve Maxwell, M.S., the wrestler, Brazilian jujitsu world champion, and trainer who invited me here. It's a rare opportunity for him to witness an exotic form of his favorite sport, as well as a chance to check off one more stop in a nomadic existence dedicated to one goal: exploring the world's most extreme fitness cultures.

Maxwell has no home, no car, and no keys of any sort. He trains his clients, who range from martial arts masters to suburban dads, almost exclusively online. His possessions fit neatly into a 29-inch suitcase. And for the last five years, he has traveled the world to find new training techniques and rediscover old ones. "I'm my own walking experiment," says Maxwell, whose international exploits have earned him the nickname "The Fitness Hunter" and landed him squarely on the short list of the world's best trainers.

Maxwell's travels have also led him to rethink many of the fitness industry's most accepted training principles, from proper breathing and lifting techniques to the fundamentals of dieting and sports nutrition. And with each stop on his never-ending world tour, he comes closer to his ultimate prize. "My focus is becoming an ageless athlete," says Maxwell.

Congratulate him on that. His gray hairs betray his 60 years, but his lithe, muscular body would just as easily make him a fit 30-year-old. "You can't stop aging, but you do have some control over its speed, and if you know what you're doing, you can slow it to a crawl."

An explosion of applause causes Maxwell to shift his gaze back to the field where the grapplers continue to throw, lift, and flip each other in matches that can last anywhere from a few seconds to 45 minutes. "These guys are a perfect blend of mobility, power, and stamina," he says. "I've got to try this." He'll get his chance.

THE LAW OF ADAPTATION

"Aging isn't a cellular process as much as it is a loss of mobility," says Maxwell, squinting through the brightening dawn. "Most people have simply forgotten how to move. Today I'm going to help you reclaim those lost movement patterns."

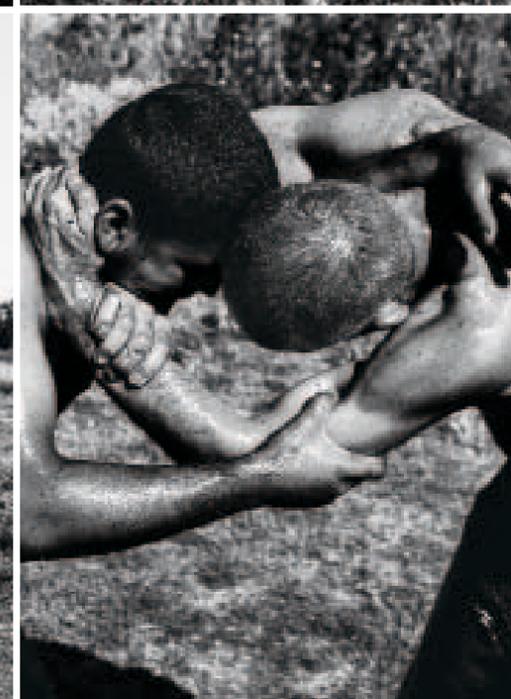
We're in a park near the southern mouth of the Bosphorus strait, a wide, busy waterway that bisects Istanbul and separates Europe from Asia. Two of Maxwell's clients have flown in from Dubai to take advantage of a rare opportunity to train with him in person, and as we stretch the sleep from our bodies, the city awakens as well. "Right now many people are climbing out of bed and preparing for work," says Maxwell. "They're about to begin a day of sitting—in cars, at desks, on sofas at home—and continue a lifetime of stiffness." He's looking for a good place for us to work out so we won't suffer that fate.

Like most animals, human beings are designed to be mobile—to run, walk, jog, crawl, swim, climb, throw, jump, and when necessary, fight. "But the body is very efficient," says Maxwell. "It adapts quickly to whatever position or movement pattern it finds itself in most often."

For most of us—a full 86 percent, according to a recent survey—that position is sitting. The effect is cumulative: The more you sit, the stiffer your joints become and the further your balance and coordination systems fall into disuse. "The next thing you know, you have problems getting out of a chair and putting on socks," says Maxwell.

This lack of mobility isn't just an inconvenience. Brazilian researchers found that the more assistance you need to stand up from a seated position on the floor (by using your hands or knees, for example), the more likely you are to die prematurely. And that's on top of the 18 percent increased risk of premature death that the American Cancer Society associated with sitting for more than six

► **ON THE HUNT**
The Fitness Hunter, Steve Maxwell (top left), gets a lesson in Turkish oil wrestling a few hundred yards away from where the country's top grapplers do battle.



Photographs by BENJAMIN LOWY for Men's Health/reportage by Getty Images



“You can’t stop aging, but you have some control over its speed; if you know what you’re doing, you can slow it to a crawl.”

“Look what a construction crew left us,” says Maxwell. He walks over to two concrete slabs, each of which easily weighs 100-plus pounds. “One for me and one for you. Let’s do some loaded carries.” Suddenly I’m in a strongman competition.

The slabs have no handles or convenient holds. They’re not resting on hooks or sitting on stands. Indeed, they were never intended to be used as muscle builders—and that’s precisely why Maxwell is drawn to them. “It doesn’t get better than this,” he says, hoisting one of the giant slabs off the ground and carrying it 30 yards. “It’s as if they knew we were coming.”

I follow suit with far less grace and far more effort. “Now we’ll walk them back. You first,” he says, smiling at my dismay. “You’re not going to let an old man outlift you, are you?”

Put me on a bench, and I’ll outpress Maxwell. Give me a pair of dumbbells, and I’ll out-curl him. But out here, where objects aren’t conveniently sized, shaped, or textured for superior grip, he’s a beast. “You want to know why I had an easier time with those concrete blocks?” asks Maxwell. “Because strength is a skill, influenced by a functional understanding of leverage, and I have more than 20 years of practice on you.” Then we drop the weights and spider-lunge over to a grove of trees to perform commando pullups.

THE MYTH OF PROTEIN

The following morning, we jump in a car and drive three hours northwest to a small city called Edirne. Once the capital of the Ottoman Empire (from 1365 to 1453), this town of old mosques and cobblestone streets is now better known for two things: decorative fruit-shaped soaps and the aforementioned Kirkpınar, which it has hosted every year since 1924.

The city practically explodes during the annual oil-wrestling competition, entertaining tourists and athletes with concerts, fairs, and late-night festivals. Maxwell is in his element, and as we weave through the streets, he receives more than the occasional nod from hulking wrestlers who notice his thick, cauliflower ears. “They turn some people off, but in this community, they’re a badge of honor,” says Maxwell. “It doesn’t matter where you are or where you come from—wrestling is a brotherhood.”

As we sit down for lunch, Maxwell studies the tables around us. “One thing I’ve noticed about the athletes here is that they don’t seem to be afraid of carbs,” he says. He got over his own “carbophobia” years ago when he traveled to rural China and saw how ripped people could become on a largely rice-based diet. “I’m also not a fan of protein supplements,” says Maxwell. “People have been building muscle for millennia without powders and shakes—just look at all of those guys in prison and the military who sculpt bodybuilder-like physiques on relatively low-protein diets.”

Such observations might sound casual—indeed, that’s how they’re uttered—but they suggest a man who thinks ahead of the curve. Researchers at the University of Tampa, for example, recently found that rice protein is just as effective as whey, the previously undisputed king of protein supplements, at supporting muscle growth. Not that using either one will do you much good in the long run, suggests a recent study in the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research*. The scientists found that after eight weeks of resistance training, all study participants showed similar strength gains regardless of whether they supplemented with protein or not.

The following morning, as we’re watching the parade that signals the beginning of the 652nd Kirkpınar, Maxwell drops another bomb. “Remind me to show you how to breathe,” he says. “The way most guys do it, they can shave years off their lives every time they lift.”

THE POWER OF BREATH

It’s six in the morning, and even though I have two cups of coffee on Maxwell, I’m finding it hard to keep up. “Today we’re doing pullups, maybe some squats and pushups,” he announces as we weave our way toward the day’s training grounds. He’s found the perfect pullup bar—a metal swing set—in a playground, and he’s eager to put it to use. “Many people get caught up in ‘variation’ when they exercise, but sometimes I like to focus on ‘nonvariation,’” he says. “One exercise can be an entire workout, and you don’t need to constantly change the exercises you do in order to see results.”

When it comes to building strength, small changes can often be more effective than large ones. “Take the pullup,” says Maxwell, grabbing the swing set’s crossbar and suspend-

hours a day outside of work—an amount of sedentary leisure time accrued easily by many Americans. “Most people are dying piece by piece every day,” says Maxwell. “And the crazy thing is that they accept it.”

One way to prevent the downward spiral caused by sitting, says Maxwell, is to perform a series of movement drills that he calls “vestibular reset training.” (See “Your Total-Body Reset” in this article.) Your vestibular system is what tells your brain where you are in space, helping you stay balanced and stable. By stimulating that system with exercises that coordinate movements between each side of your body, you can open up your joints, enhance coordination, and regain mobility that many of us have lost to a life of sitting.

“This is what 60 should look like,” says Maxwell as he lowers himself into a deep squat and rolls backward, touching his toes to the ground behind his head. “People talk about wanting to feel like a kid again, but their goal should be to move like a baby, because that’s the last time they did it well.”

We spend the next hour maneuvering like toddlers—crawling, rocking, rolling, and squatting on grass still damp with morning dew. Maxwell watches me crawl 40 yards forward, backward, and side to side. “You’re moving your opposite hands and knees together, just like a baby. Many people have lost

that pattern and instead move the arms and legs on each side of their body together.”

It looks like a physical act, but really it’s a neurological exercise. By coordinating opposite limbs, I’m facilitating the flow of information between the two hemispheres of my brain, each of which controls the opposite side of my body. “You’re enhancing not only your mind-muscle connection but also coordination and balance,” says Maxwell.

The most important benefit of vestibular reset training, however, is its effect on the joints, which move through greater ranges of motion. “Increasing mobility is the secret to unlocking greater strength,” says Maxwell, who champions such training as the ultimate warmup. “Perform it before every workout, and you’ll see improvements in your deadlift, squat, bench press—every exercise you do.”

THE KEY TO CONSISTENCY

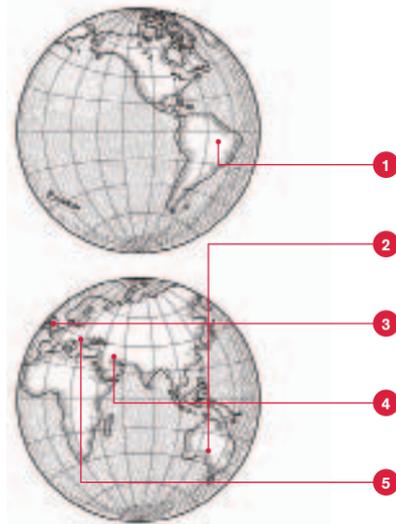
The following morning I meet Maxwell in the same park, and after a brief vestibular circuit, he hands me a pair of gloves with rubberized grips. “Let’s see what kind of fitness equipment we can get our hands on,” he says, grinning widely.

There’s another reason Maxwell is called the Fitness Hunter. As he trots the globe, he only occasionally works out in gyms, instead preferring to sweat outdoors using whatever tools are available to him—tree limbs, swing sets, stairs, rocks, park benches. For Maxwell, the principle is similar to always ordering coffee black—if you never become used to extraneous frills like barbells and cable machines, you’ll never be disappointed, and you’ll never give yourself an excuse to miss a workout.

▲ **THE REAL FIGHT CLUB**
Slick with olive oil and clad in leather pants, these two wrestlers struggle to flip each other belly up and win the match.



MAXWELL'S GLOBAL TRAINING GUIDE



The World's Craziest Exercises

Spice up your tired routine with five moves from Maxwell's favorite fitness hunts.

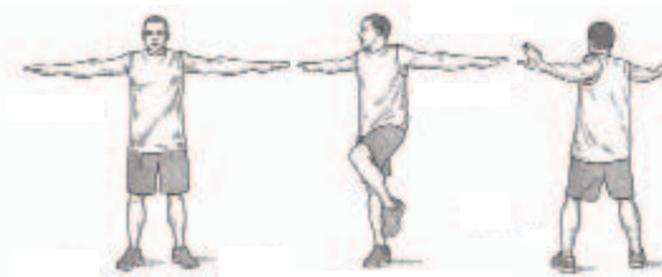
- 1 / SWOOP (BRAZIL)**
Assume a bear squat—get on your hands and toes with knees bent, arms straight, butt over ankles, feet hip-width apart. Thread your left leg beneath your body and swing it backward, jumping over it with your right foot so you end up in a mountain climber position (left leg straight, right leg bent). Do 10 reps. Repeat with your right leg.
- 2 / DRAGON TWIST (AUSTRALIA)**
Stand with your feet slightly beyond shoulder width. Twist to the right, corkscrewing your body so that your left knee ends up outside your right ankle, your left arm crosses your chest, and your right arm crosses your back. Unwind; repeat to your left. Continue alternating—3 sets of 20 reps.
- 3 / DRAGAN RADOVIĆ VERTICAL LIFT (ENGLAND)**
Hold a pair of dumbbells next to your sides, feet shoulder-width apart. Curl the right dumbbell to your shoulder, and then press it straight up. Lower it back to your side and repeat with the left dumbbell. Do 100 reps total (50 per side).
- 4 / HALF-MOON PUSHUP (IRAN)**
Get on your hands and toes and raise your hips to form an upside-down V. Now lower yourself into a bear squat position. Rotate your knees to your left as you pull your chest to your left hand. Now move it to your right hand, rotating your knees to the right. Return to the bear squat and repeat, this time starting to your right. Continue alternating sides. Do 20 repetitions total.
- 5 / ABC CHINUP (AUSTRIA)**
Grab a chinup bar using an underhand grip and hang there. Pull your chest to the bar (A). Hold for 5 seconds. Lower yourself, pausing halfway down (B) and then three-quarters of the way down (C) for 5 seconds each. Do as many as you can.

Your Total-Body Reset

Steve Maxwell does a variation of the “vestibular reset” circuit shown here before every workout to prime his muscles and reinforce efficient movement patterns. “Do each move for two to three minutes,” he says.

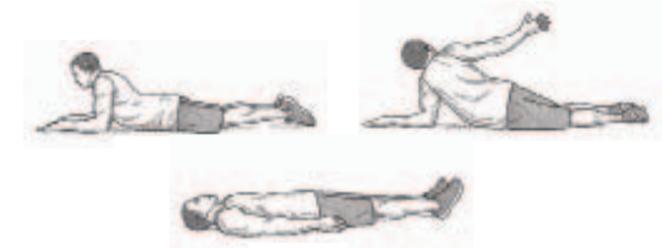
SPIN

Stand with your feet slightly beyond shoulder width and raise your arms out to your sides. Spin your body in a clockwise direction, taking exaggerated high-knee steps.



ROLL

Lie on your stomach and support your torso on your forearms. Look over your right shoulder, reach backward with your right arm, and roll onto your back (don't push off with your legs). Continue looking to your right as you reach across your body with your left arm and use your core to roll onto your stomach. Roll back to where you started, and repeat in the other direction. Continue alternating.



ROCK

Get on your hands and knees with your butt over your ankles. Pull your body forward as you thrust your hips down until you're in an upward-facing-dog position. (Your hips should be a few inches off the floor.) Reverse the move to return to the starting position.



HIP RAISE

Lie on your back with your arms by your sides, knees bent, and feet flat. Bend your elbows 90 degrees so that your forearms are perpendicular to the floor. Raise your hips so your body forms a straight line from your shoulders to your knees. Pause, and then return to the starting position.



CRAWL

Get down on on your hands and knees. Crawl forward for one minute and then backward for one minute, moving your opposite hands and knees together (e.g., left hand and right knee, right hand and left knee). You can also crawl sideways.



ing himself above the dusty earth. “You can change your grip, alter your pace, lengthen or shorten your rest between sets—that's all the variation you need to maintain muscle growth and avoid plateaus.”

As we begin our pullup pyramid—starting with a set of one, working our way to a set of 10, doing as many sets of 10 as we can, and then working back to a set of one—Maxwell explains his breathing comment from the day before. “The way most guys breathe when they exercise looks like they're taking a crap,” says Maxwell. He notes, not unkindly, that he's caught me doing it too: holding my breath with a grimace during the hardest part of a movement. It's an instinctive reaction to lifting something heavy, and the result is an increase in abdominal and intrathoracic pressure that helps stabilize the spine. Indeed, that's why many powerlifters use a similar technique—called the Valsalva maneuver—on purpose. Unfortunately, holding your breath also temporarily impairs the delivery of blood and oxygen to your muscles, including the ones lifting the weight that might otherwise crush you. As if that isn't worrisome enough, “breath holding can trigger an adrenalized ‘panic state’ that floods your body with cortisol, a potent stress hormone that breaks down muscle and delays recovery,” says Maxwell.

The trick is to learn how to brace your spine and breathe simultaneously as you lift. Step one: Contract your abs forcefully as if you're about to be punched in the gut. Step two: “Focus on breathing into your lower lungs, and match your respiratory rate to your exertion level,” says Maxwell. In short, take deep belly breaths, and as the exercise becomes harder, breathe more frequently.

If that's too complicated, Maxwell says, simply focus on inhaling during the lowering phase of an exercise and exhaling during the harder, lifting phase. Anything is better than holding your breath, even for a moment, he claims. But sometimes, he admits, respiration isn't always under one's control.

THE SECRET OF TRUE STRENGTH

“I can hardly breathe—it feels like he's going to dislocate my rib,” Maxwell gasps as he's hoisted off the ground by a young Turkish wrestler and marched five paces across a field peppered with crumbling ruins and lonely ash trees. “I actually feel myself passing out.”

There's no panic in Maxwell's voice—only awe. He has just received his first lesson in how to win (or lose, depending on your perspective) a Turkish oil-wrestling match. “The other way is to expose your opponent's belly to the sky,” says Evren Oz as he

▲ COOLDOWN
Having finished his match, a wrestler finds some relief from the searing summer heat, which often reaches 90°F or higher during the Kirkpinar.

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The Grappler Gauntlet

Maxwell designed this circuit to build the kind of functional strength and raw athleticism on display at the Kirkpinar. Do each of these exercises for 40 seconds, resting 20 seconds between them. Complete a total of 5 circuits.

Illustrations by HARRY BATES

1

HINDU PUSHUP

Assume a downward-facing-dog position, with your feet together and hips raised to form an upside-down V. Drop your hips and pull your body forward as you raise your head and shoulders toward the ceiling. Reverse the movement to return to the starting position.

2

HINDU SQUAT

Stand with your arms straight and extended slightly behind you, palms facing back. Without pausing, first squat onto the balls of your feet while swinging your arms up to chest level; then stand up, drawing your hands to your sides as you rotate your palms upward. Lower your arms to the starting position and repeat.

3

CLEAN AND JERK

Hold a kettlebell in your right hand in front of your waist. Swing it between your legs and up to a “rack position” (elbow tucked, fist in front of pec, weight resting on forearm). Bend your knees, drive the weight up, and drop under it, pressing it straight overhead as you stand up. Lower and repeat. Switch arms after 20 seconds.

4

TOWEL CHINUP

Drape a towel over a chinup bar and grab one end in each hand. Hang at arm's length, bending your knees and crossing your ankles behind you; this position is known as a dead hang. Pull your chest as high as you can. Pause, and then lower your body back to a dead hang.

5

DECK SQUAT

Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and your hands by your sides. Lower your body into a deep squat so your butt is an inch or two off the floor, and then roll backward onto the ground, swinging your legs in an arc as you try to touch your toes to the floor behind your head. Reverse the movement to return to the starting position.

lowers Maxwell back onto the scrubby grass. And in Turkey, the wrestlers have no qualms about reaching down each other's trousers to gain a grip or cinch their rival's waistband—a maneuver that impinges the diaphragm, making every breath more difficult.

We've met Oz on a grassy plain near the stadium where, just a couple of hours from now, the third and final day of the Kirkpınar will commence. Although the sun still sits low on the horizon, it's already hot—closing in on 95°F—and the men, covered in olive oil and dressed in Turkey's traditional leather wrestling pants (or *kispet*), is dripping with sweat. "There's no way I could have escaped his grip," says Maxwell, wiping oil from his eyes as he catches his breath. "It's amazing how strong he is."

You'd never know it by looking at Oz. Like many Turkish oil wrestlers, he isn't rippling with muscle. And standing just 5'9" tall and weighing about 180 pounds, he isn't particularly imposing either. But he's strong and fast—the very definition of power. "It's a different kind of strength than most Westerners are used to," says Maxwell. "When I was young, we called it farm-boy strength, and the guys who had it were a lot—and I mean a lot—stronger than they looked."

Today it goes by another name—functional strength—and in Turkey, most wrestlers don't build it in a gym. Their training partners become their barbells. "My opponent isn't made of iron," says Oz. "So lifting weights won't help me beat him."

Consider it the ultimate example of sport-specific conditioning. During the next hour, Oz takes Maxwell through a series of partner carries, walking lunges, and kneeling pick-ups that give an entirely new meaning to the idea of body-weight training. It's exhausting work, and by the time they're done, the deep, percussive beats of tribal drums have begun drifting across the field, signaling the start of the day's matches.

"We'll weave some of these exercises into our workout tomorrow," Maxwell promises as we walk toward the stadium. Inspired by this Turkish strongman, he plans to begin experimenting on me as well.

"This is what being a fitness hunter is all about," says Maxwell, oblivious to the curious looks he's receiving as we join the throngs converging on the arena. He's still wearing leather pants, still covered in oil, and after a couple of hours with Oz, he's smeared with enough grass and dirt to almost pass for a Turkish wrestler. "I learn something new everywhere I go, but almost invariably, I also reaffirm the same thing: The human body is the ultimate fitness machine. It's the only tool you'll ever need to get in incredible shape." ■