

SECRETS

From America's Best Gyms

30 new
ways to
build the
body you
want

BY SCOTT QUILL
Photographs by Embry Rucker



OUR LIST OF THE COUNTRY'S 30 BEST GYMS— as selected by our panel of fitness advisors—is defined by the only criteria that truly matter: **Results.** Make that big results. The kind that can help you get fit now, and live longer and better later. But because these gyms might lie outside your zip code, we've gathered elite advice from their top fitness experts and offer it to you here, for free—no membership fee required. After all, doesn't your body deserve the best?

Master the pullup

● Of the four pullup bars at **Bullet Gym, in Missoula, Montana**, the one shown here on the back side of their building is the most challenging. Its chain suspension forces your core to work harder to leverage your body. But it's not just the equipment that sets this old-school gym apart from most places—it's the way the men who train here use it.

"Ask people where they feel fatigued most during pullups or lat pulldowns, and they usually mention shoulders and arms," says owner Mike Casey. But if you can keep those areas from giving out too soon, the pullup becomes the ultimate move for building wider lats.

The key to limiting fatigue, says Casey, is relaxing your hands and pulling your shoulder blades back and down. Here's a trick: Focus on hooking your fingers over the bar rather than squeezing it, and apply pressure with your middle finger, ring finger and pinkie. Then squeeze your shoulder blades down and think about pushing your elbows down into your lats instead of pulling up with your arms.

Once you've completed a pullup, move to another exercise in your routine. Return for another pullup after each exercise. By workout's end, you'll have completed twice as many repetitions than if you were doing them all at once.

Despite offering a scenic view of the Rocky mountains, the rustic back porch at Bullet Gym isn't made for kicking back.

PUMP OUT MORE REPS

● “When bench-pressing, keep your wrists as straight as possible,” says Joe DeFranco, the owner of **DeFranco’s Training Systems, in Wyckoff, New Jersey**. “When your wrists bend back too much, your triceps fatigue faster because the bar is farther from your center of gravity.”

LEARN TO SKY

● “To jump higher, concentrate on pushing the ground away from you,” says Jamie Hale, C.S.C.S., the owner of **Total Body Fitness, in Winchester, Kentucky**. For even better results, combine this strategy with an exercise called the depth jump: Stand at the edge of a 12-inch box and then simply step off it so that you land on the balls of both feet simultaneously. (Don’t allow your heels to touch the floor.) When you make contact with the floor, jump as high as you can. That’s one rep. Step back onto the box and repeat. Do 4 to 5 sets of 3 to 5 reps, resting for 60 to 90 seconds between sets.

LUNGE FOR SPEED

● Instead of holding dumbbells at your sides when you lunge, try holding one dumbbell out in front of your chest with your arms extended. This should stop you from leaning forward as you fatigue, says David Donatucci, M.Ed., C.S.C.S., a performance specialist at **International Performance Institute, in Bradenton, Florida**. As a result, you’ll train your glutes harder with each repetition, a key for generating more power when you sprint.

REV UP YOUR ENGINE

● Try this simple 2-minute warmup: Do high knees, jumping jacks, skips, and side-to-side hops for 15 seconds each. Then drop to the floor for 15 seconds each of pushups, crunches, mountain climbers, and squat thrusts. “You’ve just activated your entire backside, core, and shoulders, and added a little running,” says David Jack, life and sport director at **Teamworks Centers, in Acton, Massachusetts**. The payoff: Researchers at the United States Military Academy at West Point found that this type of warmup helped men sprint faster, jump higher, and throw harder.

START SANDBAGGING

● “There’s no equipment that frustrates guys as much as a sandbag,” says Mike Morris, C.S.C.S., head strength and conditioning coach for the **Tampa Bay Buccaneers Physical Development Center**. In this case, frustration is a good thing. “An awkward bag requires you to use more muscles and expend greater energy to lift it.” Pick up inexpensive sandbags from your local home-improvement store and use them for presses, curls, squats, deadlifts, and power cleans.

END SHOULDER PAIN

● “The cause of your pain is not always where it hurts,” says Michael Boyle, A.T.C., the owner of **Mike Boyle Strength & Conditioning, in Winchester, Massachusetts**. “If your shoulder hurts in front, then massage, ice, and stretch the back of your shoulder.” Try this stretch: Lie on your right side with your right upper arm on the floor perpendicular to your body and your forearm pointing straight up. Keeping your shoulder blades pulled together, and your elbow in place, rotate your palm toward the floor as far as you can, then return. Do 10 repetitions.

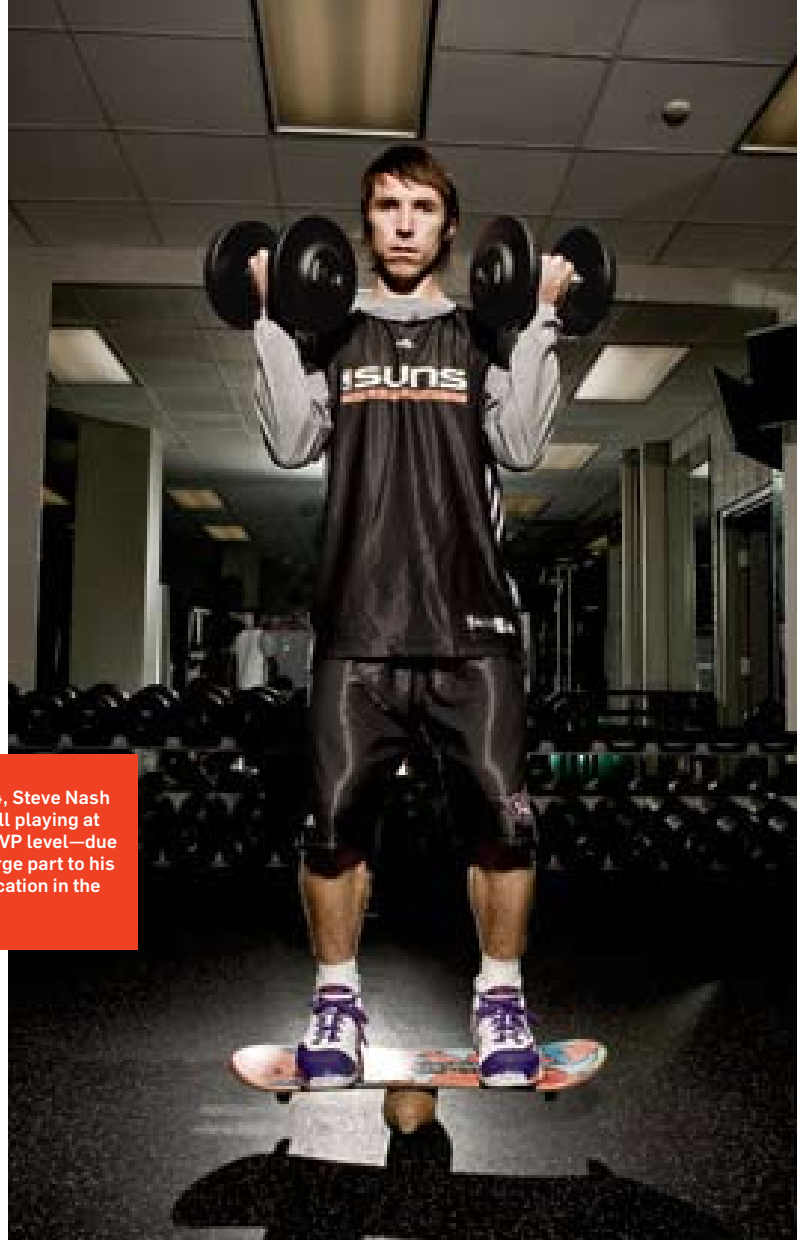
PULL FOR POWER

● “When you lower your body during a dip, try to pull yourself down very slowly,” says Robb Wolf, the owner of **NorCal Strength & Conditioning, in Chico, VCalifornia**. “This forces both your biceps and triceps to fire simultaneously and may cause an overflow of the chemicals needed for muscle contraction.” The end result: You’ll be able to press yourself back up with less effort.

LOSE THE SHOES

● Running or jumping rope barefoot on grass or sand strengthens your arches and Achilles tendons, helping to restore proper mechanics to flat-footed runners. Barefoot training will also make you faster, by developing the smaller muscles in your feet, says Kurt Hester, C.S.C.S., the director of training for **D1 Sports Training, in Nashville, Tennessee**.

At 34, Steve Nash is still playing at an MVP level—due in large part to his dedication in the gym.



Achieve Balance

● Steve Nash knows his way around a weight room. “I’ve spent half my life in gyms,” says the two-time NBA MVP and the owner of a sports club in Vancouver. But he’s not showing off in the **Suns Strength Room** (above). No, Nash is demonstrating his ability to perform nearly his entire strength routine on a Vew-Do balance board, which is like a skateboard without wheels. This feat requires core strength, ankle stability, and lots of practice. It’s one reason the Suns consistently rank among the most injury-free franchises in the NBA.

“Striking a balance between stability and strength is the basis of basketball training, as well as most other sports,” says Erik Phillips, M.S., A.T.C., head strength and conditioning coach for the Suns. He says that simply performing some of your exercises with a split stance—one foot forward, the other foot back—will add balance to your training and help shore up your core. Try it with squats, overhead presses, and rows. Just stagger your stance and then perform the exercise. Switch leg positions after each set.



Phoenix Suns center Amare Stoudemire presses as hard in the weight room as he does on the court.

PREPARE YOUR MUSCLES FOR ANY CHALLENGE

● Before he was a firefighter at the **Phoenix Fire Department**, Rayne Gray was a triathlete. “I don’t have a set date to race now, but I need to be ready to perform my best at any moment,” he says. To determine how to stay fit at all times despite a volatile work schedule, exercise scientist Matthew Rhea, Ph.D., studied Gray and his colleagues. He discovered that the best workout for the day depends on a lot of variables—for example, sleep patterns the night before, nutrition for several days prior, stress levels, and motivation. “A savvy exerciser will pay attention to all of these factors and adjust his or her training accordingly,” says Rhea, who is the director of human movement at A.T. Still University, in Mesa, Arizona. Or you can take them into account ahead of time and use a method called “daily undulating periodization.” With this technique, you vary your sets and reps with each workout—3 sets of 10 reps on Monday, 4 sets of 5 reps on Wednesday, and 2 sets of 15 on Friday. By using a different training scheme each session, you’ll automatically be varying the volume and intensity of your workout, allowing for faster recovery and less chance of overtaxing your body. In fact, Rhea found that this approach increased strength twofold in men compared with the traditional method of gradually increasing sets and reps. While the firefighters often train with unconventional equipment—for instance, tractor tires and gymnast rings—the principle of varying your workout applies equally as well to free weights.

The firefighters mimic the challenges they face on the job, such as flipping and dragging heavy objects out of the way.



Using gymnast rings (ringtraining.com) to perform pullups, dips, and suspended pushups forces your core to work harder.



Kettlebell training is ideal for improving the explosive power you need to run faster, jump higher, and perform better.



ADD 10 POUNDS TO YOUR BENCH

● “To boost your bench press, raise your head and upper back off the bench as you lower the barbell to your chest, almost like you’re doing a situp,” says Mark Bell, C.S.C.S., the owner of **SuperTraining Gym, in Sacramento, California**. “As soon as the bar touches your T-shirt, drive your head and torso into

the bench, and press the bar up as forcefully as you can.” The result: Your body uncoils like a loaded spring, helping you push more weight. (Always use a spotter.)

FINISH LIKE A CHAMP

● “After the last full rep of your final set, do four to eight more reps through the last quarter of the range of motion. Then hold the

weight in the final position for 5 to 10 seconds, flexing hard,” says Brian Dobson, the owner of **Metroflex Gym, in Arlington, Texas**, the training home of eight-time Mr. Olympia Ronnie Coleman.

RAISE THE DEAD

● “Before you perform a deadlift, warm up by first doing the movement while standing on a 4-inch box or step,” says Mark Philippi, C.S.C.S., a seven-time World’s Strongest Man competitor and the owner of **Philippi Sports Institute, in Las Vegas, Nevada**. “When you start your regular sets, the exercise will seem easier because you won’t have to move the weight as far.” For your elevated warmup, do 3 sets of 3 reps, using a weight that’s 50, 75, and 90 percent, respectively, of the weight you plan to work out with.

CARVE YOUR ABS

● For total ab development, employ an improved version of the classic cable woodchop, an exercise that mimics the swinging of an ax. “Instead of pulling the cable from your shoulder to the opposite knee, try chopping in every line of action,” says Jim Liston, the founder of **CATZ Competitive Athlete Training Zone, in Pasadena, California**. Your start and end points are your eyes, shoulders, waist, knees, and ankles. Choose one point and pull the handle to another. Do 12 reps in one line, turn around and repeat. Then choose a new line in each of 2 more sets.

JUMPSTART YOUR WORKOUT

● Can’t get up for your training session? “Make an ankle-deep icewater bath—as cold as you can bear—and stand in it for 20 seconds,” says Mark Verstegen, C.S.C.S., the owner of **Athletes’ Performance, in Tempe, Arizona**. Then dry off and hit the gym. “The cold water will shock your nervous system, giving you an immediate rush of energy,” he says.

PERFECT YOUR FORM

● “Once you’re in the starting position of the squat, push your hips back as far as you can before you allow your knees to bend,” says Brian Schwab, C.S.C.S., the owner of **Orlando Barbell, in Oviedo,**

Florida. “This recruits the often-neglected muscles of your hamstrings and glutes while reducing the strain on your knees.”

LOOK UP FOR LATS

● “When doing pullups, fix your eyes on the ceiling,” says Logan Hood, the owner of **Epoch Training, in Los Angeles, California**. “This causes you to pull your chest toward the bar instead of your chin, which better engages your lats.”

CHEAT FOR 4 WEEKS

● Start your presses, rows, or curls with your elbows bent about 6 inches, and return to that point with each rep. “The tension on your muscles is greatly reduced near the end range of motion,” says Juan Carlos Santana, the owner of **The Institute of Human Performance, in Boca Raton, Florida**. “This keeps tension on your muscles to spur faster growth.” Do 3 to 4 sets of 10 to 15 reps, and try this technique for a month. Then return to standard full range-of-motion training to boost strength and flexibility.

BURN MORE FAT

● “If you want to become lean, finish off your weight workout with a ‘leg matrix,’” says Alwyn Cosgrove, C.S.C.S., the owner of **Results Fitness, in Santa Clarita, California**. “It’s a body-weight circuit that’s highly effective for both fat loss and cardiovascular conditioning.” Without resting between exercises, perform each movement for 15 seconds. Then repeat one to two times. As you progress, gradually increase the duration of each set to 30 seconds.

The Leg Matrix

1. Jump squat: Squat, leap as high as you can, then repeat.
2. Speed squat: Do each rep as fast as possible.
3. Pause squat: For each rep, pause for one second in the down position.
4. Squat hold: Lower yourself into a squat, and hold for the set duration.

FIRE UP YOUR MUSCLES

● Try this tweak with just about any exercise. “Hold the weight in the starting position for 3 to 5 seconds before performing your first rep, and



Break through strength barriers

● What appears to be a log cabin (left) is actually a room for mixed martial arts on the second floor of a warehouse called **Total Performance Sports, in Everett, Massachusetts**. This room is also used for explosive exercises like the kettlebell snatch shown here. Mastering the snatch—imagine that you’re throwing a weight from the floor toward the ceiling, but without letting go of it—will require your neurological system to recruit more muscle fibers, says the owner, C.J. Murphy. So it’s the perfect exercise to break out of a strength slump.

Most men who fail to derive the full benefit from the snatch haven’t mastered the technique, or they select a weight that’s too light. Your brain will only allow the maximal number of muscle fibers to fire in power movements when you use very heavy weight, Murphy says. So what’s heavy enough? Find a pair of dumbbells that allows you to complete no more than 5 shrugs and challenges your grip by the last rep. Then go 10 pounds lighter. This is the ideal weight for the snatch. Do sets of no more than 5 reps. Just learning the snatch? Start with half as much weight, and go to MensHealth.com/bestgyms for an exercise description and video.

again when you've finished your last rep," says Marc Bartley, C.S.C.S., the owner of **South Carolina Barbell, in Columbia, South Carolina.**

"This stimulates your central nervous system to activate more muscle fibers, which allows you to generate more force."

STAY FOCUSED

● "Don't stare at yourself in the mirror when you squat," says Matt Wenning, the director of athlete training and testing at **Westside Barbell, in Columbus, Ohio.** "It'll cause you to lean farther forward, which increases the strain on your lower back and reduces overall strength." His advice: Before you descend, find a mark that's stable and just above eye level, and stay focused on it throughout the movement. Just as important, have your training partner watch for flaws in your form.

BLAST YOUR BICEPS

● "Imagine you're holding a grapefruit between your shoulder blades as you do arm curls," says Micheal A. Clark, D.P.T., the CEO of the **National Academy of Sports Medicine, in Calabasas, California.** Standing tall with your shoulder blades squeezed back and down allows your rotator cuff to properly control the head of your humerus, or upper arm bone. As a result, you'll be able to produce a greater amount of force with your biceps, says Clark. This will allow you to complete more reps with more weight, for greater strength and size.

KEEP LIFTING

● "Take advantage of your 30s and 40s," says Bob Bonham, the owner of **Strong & Shapely Gym, in East Rutherford, New Jersey.** "Because your metabolism starts to slow, it actually becomes easier for skinny men to pack on muscle compared with when they were in their 20s." Bottom line: You can build muscle at any age.

CREATE AN OBSTACLE

● Try this Polish abs exercise called the hanging hurdle. "It works your entire core," says Mark McLaughlin, the owner of **Performance Training Center, in Beaverton, Oregon.** Here's how to do it: Place a bench under and par-

allel with a chinup bar. Now hang from the bar with your feet together, knees slightly bent, and legs to one side of the bench. Without changing the bend in your knees, simply lift your legs over the bench to the opposite side. Repeat back and forth for 10 to 15 seconds. Your goal: 2 sets of 60 seconds, with 30 to 90 seconds of rest between sets.

FIX YOUR WEAK SPOT

● "Nine out of 10 guys don't specifically train their lower back," says Jim Hoskinson, the owner of **IronWorks Gym, in Callahan, Florida.** "And that's unfortunate because it's the key to total-body strength." Hoskinson's fix is to perform the seated good morning after you train your lower body at least once a week: Holding a barbell across your upper back, sit down on a flat bench with your torso upright. Keeping your lower back naturally arched, bend forward at the waist as far as you can. Then lift your torso back to the start. That's 1 repetition. Do 5 sets of 10 repetitions, resting 60 to 90 seconds between sets.

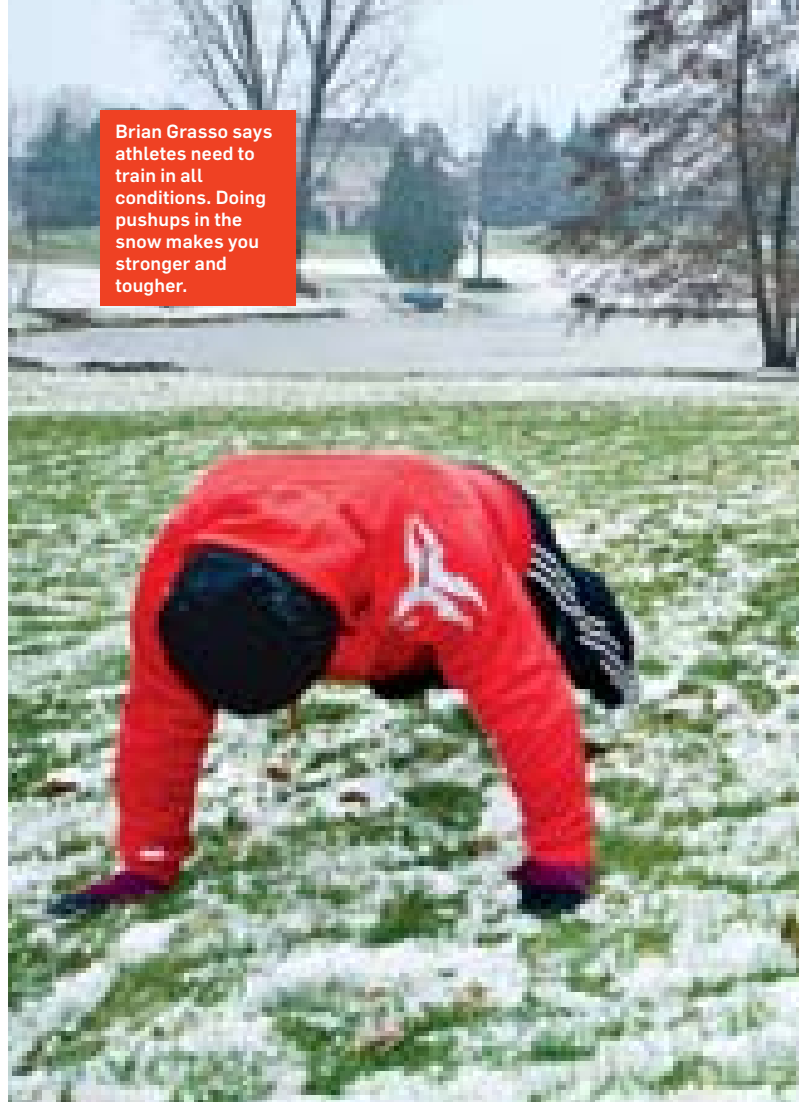
GET MORE ON THE FLOOR

● "When you do a pushup, make your body as stiff as a board by bracing your abs, and flexing your glutes and quads," says Lance Mosley, owner of **CrossFit HardCore, in Boca Raton, Florida.** "Then lower yourself until your chin, chest, and thighs simultaneously touch the floor." This is what Mosley calls a "true pushup."

TRY A BAND-AID

● "I have an 8,200 square-foot gym filled with high-dollar exercise equipment," says Jean-Paul Francoeur, the owner of **JP Fitness in Little Rock, Arkansas.** "But my favorite training tool is a giant rubber band that costs about 20 bucks." Francoeur explains that large bands—like those at resistancebandtraining.com—are not only as effective for building muscle as free weights, but also allow you to take your gym anywhere. Go to MensHealth.com/bestgyms for video instruction on how to use the bands to perform popular exercises. ■

Brian Grasso says athletes need to train in all conditions. Doing pushups in the snow makes you stronger and tougher.





The athletes Grasso trains use everything in his backyard for resistance—even Grasso himself.



Simplify your workout

● The CEO of the International Youth Conditioning Association trains all his clients, from Little Leaguers to professional baseball players, with \$50 worth of equipment in his backyard. “I’ve owned several nice facilities,” says Brian Grasso (squatting, left), “but I’ve learned that anyone can produce great results with virtually no equipment.” Hence his current training facility: **Brian Grasso’s backyard, in Hawthorn Woods, Illinois.** There, Grasso takes a gladiator’s approach to making muscle. “We take heavy objects—a wheelbarrow, sandbags, or cement bags, for instance—and pick them up, walk with them, and lift them overhead. And we use a sturdy tree limb or swing set for pullups,” he says. But don’t just lift up and down or forward and backward. Muscle grows best when you train in “nonlinear” patterns, says Grasso. For example, try “clockwork pushups.” Keep your feet planted and move around an imaginary clock with your hands, completing 5 pushups in each position. Another option: Create stations with markers, so you can run, jump, and skip rope in a variety of patterns. For instance, you might stagger 10 hurdles (boxes, cones, milk cartons) and jump over them 10 times. Then place sticks in an octagonal pattern, stand in the middle of it, and sprint to each corner. Next, zigzag all over your yard while jumping rope. You’ll slash fat and improve athleticism, all within shouting distance of your family.

Find and rate the best gyms in your town with our new GymFinder tool at [MensHealth.com/gymfinder](https://www.MensHealth.com/gymfinder).

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