



Hurts So GOOD

*Pain and gain are guaranteed
at Jason Shea's gym*

By Ian Aldrich

The pain begins immediately. It's a Saturday morning and I, along with 10 others, are stationed in the back of the exercise area of Athletic Performance Enhancement (APECS), a three-year-old corporate gym, owned and operated by Jason Shea '01. It's Shea, a lean, 32-year-old Franklin, Massachusetts, native who's leading the hour-long workout that will eventually have us slamming our bodies into a football sled, sliding 40 pound weights across 30 yards of fake turf, and pounding a retired 160-pound tractor trailer tire with a sledgehammer.

"Okay, I want some burpees," he says. We throw ourselves onto the floor for a pushup, jump to a squat position, then from there leap into the air. Twenty times. "Very nice," he says, inspecting a portion of the group that does not include me. For good reason: As we near the 20-count mark, I'm stumbling more than jumping, moving as though I've downed a fifth of Scotch. Shea leads the class through more jumping, a series of lunges, and plenty of abdominal work. After a good 10 minutes, Shea calls it a wrap. The warm-up has concluded.

Now, it's on to the workout.





“Feel free to quit anytime and take a breather,” he says sympathetically, as I make my way to the first of 12 stations scattered around the small cinderblock facility.

Sweat pours profusely down my face and my shirt is drenched. “I’m good,” I say, doing my best to lift, rather than drag my feet to the football sled. It’s an obvious lie, but I’m still in denial. Only 15 minutes before, when I strolled in here, I thought I was in pretty good shape.

That’s evidently not the case as I venture deeper into the workout, a regimen that includes even more lunges—this time with weights!—and something that involves clipping two spring-loaded ropes that come out the floor to a belt. Its purpose: to offer resistance as I jump straight up into the air. Or at least try to. After several poor attempts at scaling the gym’s rock wall, I move to the tire; there, my arms can barely raise the sledgehammer that I’m supposed to slam down against it.

“I’m done,” I announce to nobody in particular. Over the next 20 minutes, I watch rather than participate, with little guilt. When class concludes,

Tony Leland, a Medway resident with a shaved head and a thick Massachusetts accent, who has worked out under Shea for the last two years, offers some advice about adjusting to the trainer’s program.

“You feel like crap after the first few days,” says Leland. “Then you still feel like crap, but you feel great afterwards.”

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If Shea’s gym sounds a bit like Romper Room that’s because, it sort of is. Clean and organized? Yes. Fancy? Not really. Shiny new elliptical joggers, treadmills, and stationary bikes aren’t a part of the inventory. Instead, you’ll find things like Russian kettle bells, 25-pound rubber balls, and unusual looking devices such as the Versaclimber, an upright machine with pedals and handles that requires its user to move his or her legs and arms as fast as they can. “We call it the ‘Versakiller,’” quips one of Shea’s clients.

Shea’s approach is called functional training, and within the \$15-billion-a-year health and fitness industry, it’s becoming an increasingly popular way for Americans to work out. At its core is a focus on short, intensive exercises and drills that stress power, speed, and agility, rather than such numbers-driven activities as bench pressing and running. Some of the props may be old school, but it’s based on an intricate understanding of how the body’s various muscle groups work together to produce specific movements. In a sense, it’s a blending of established workout practices (Shea for example, is a big fan of plyometrics, the once-popular Soviet exercises that work to stretch and contract the muscles) with 21st-century science.

“We’re focusing on the intangibles,” says Shea, who has an exercise science degree. “It’s about working multiple muscle groups and building on aggression. It’s not about doing reps and counting pushups. How do you measure how hard you hit a tire?”

Or not being able to, in my case.

Professional athletes, football players in particular, have been working out this way for years. Arguably the best at his position, San Diego Chargers running back, LaDainian Tomlinson, mixes in the requisite amount of off-season weight lifting with functional training, developing, according to one recent *Sporting News* story, “specific areas of [his] body—the small muscles of his feet so he can have more strength to cut; his hips so he can spin equally as impressively in either direction; his shoulders and groin and eyes and every other element essential to elevating performance.”

Now not just millionaire athletes are turning to this method to get in better shape. In recent years, thanks to Shea and others in the field, it’s begun to catch



caption here



fire with those who have more modest incomes. At Shea's gym, a cross section of people—30- and 40-somethings, families, and teenagers—regularly sweat and grunt their way around his facility.

It's the high school athletes that Shea and his staff of eight have a particular fondness for. And those who come here represent a curious mix from competing schools. At one point during my visit, Shea works closely with Amy Festa, a forward on the Medfield High School soccer team, while a few of her rivals on the Holliston club trained under the direction of Donna Godino, the gym's general manager.

As Festa works on strengthening her hamstrings by doing a series of exercises that can best be described as reverse sit-ups, Godino has her clients trying to lift and flip the giant tractor-trailer tire. "Fire from the butt," she keeps repeating to the girls.

When they finish, Andy Kurtz assumes ownership of the tire and works with Ryan Donovan, a 17-year-old senior All-American wrestler at Franklin High School. Donovan's task: To pull the tire across the length of the gym.

"I've got so much confidence now," says Donovan, a wiry 140-pound kid who's been training at APECS more than a year. "The things he puts you through," he points to the tire, "there's comparison to what I'll get in a match."

A half-hour later, Kurtz is back at it again, this time with 16-year-old Rory Cellucci, a junior defenseman on the Medway High School soccer team. Facing a

wall seven yards away, with his back to his trainer, Cellucci waits for Kurtz to throw a small rubber ball, with some 10 knobs on it, against the wall. The trick is to not only correctly anticipate when the ball will be thrown but how, with its odd surface, it will come off the wall. As Shea explains, this kind of work, unlike running several sprints, will directly help Cellucci become a better defenseman.

And there's the rub. It's not that Cellucci and others abstain from the weight room—APECS has a full-fledged selection of free weights to work out with—but trainers like Shea reason that success on the field or floor comes in greater doses if the workouts mimic the kinds of movements they'll do during competition. It's exacting work, though, with Shea and his trainers carefully watching their clients to make sure that, say, when they jump, their knees aren't pulling in, causing their glutes to misfire.

"We're always looking for imbalances and movement deficiencies," he says.

Put another way, Shea and other functional trainers aren't in the business to create better bodies; they're trying to create better athletes, be it the captain of the Medfield lacrosse team or the 40-year-old father of three who's started to feel his back or knees a bit more than he used to. And for those muscular gym-goers who think they may be able to keep up with one of his workouts, Shea offers some advice.

"You need to check your ego at the door," he says.

That's one part of the workout I quickly got right. □