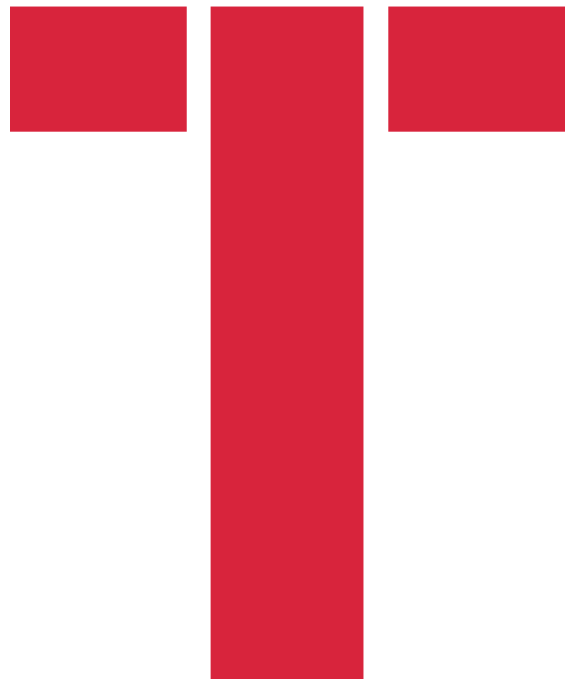




THINK

BIG

INSIDE EVERY
MAN'S BRAIN IS
A VOICE TELLING
HIM TO JUST
GIVE UP AND QUIT.
GYM JONES
WANTS TO HELP
YOU SHUT THAT
VOICE UP, BECAUSE
IN THAT SILENCE
IS STRENGTH.



The madness is about to begin.

Fifteen men stand against a wall in a 6,000-square-foot converted warehouse in Salt Lake City. They're anxious, and it shows in their unconscious movements—shifting feet, tapping fingers, darting eyes. The punk music blasting from overhead speakers adds an almost palpable intensity as Gym Jones's splendidly profane, superhero-size fitness director, Rob MacDonald, saunters up and down their ranks.

"You, 48. You, 54. You, 63," says MacDonald, jabbing a finger at three men in turn. "That's how many calories you have to burn—in one minute. If you don't make it, you'll keep trying until you fucking do."

Muffled curses filter through the music as each man considers the immensity of his task. To reach his calorie goal, which MacDonald calculates using body size and fitness level, each man must give everything. Pain is a promise, suffering guaranteed.

The first victim saddles up on the AirDyne, a stationary bike with movable handles and a giant fan for a front wheel. It's a remarkably innocent-looking torture device; the harder you pedal, the harder pedaling becomes, thanks to the exponential nature of air resistance. MacDonald smiles diabolically. "Go!"

The man pedals like Mark Cavendish on bath salts—a blur of whirling, spinning, revolving legs and pushing, pulling, flailing arms. His grimace hardens and his breathing becomes increasingly frantic as each second ticks by. Then it's over. His minute is up and he's off the bike and on his back, gasping for air and jabbing at his quads. "Next!" shouts MacDonald.

One by one the men take the test, dropping to the floor or hobbling about on spasming legs when it's over. Some fail. A guy in his 20s who was assigned 48 calories finishes with 47. "The only thing that makes Rob happier than people hitting their mark is when they miss it by a calorie," says Mark Twight, Gym Jones's founder, who's known as much for sculpting some of Hollywood's most chiseled bodies as he is for eschewing the fame that comes with it. "He loves throwing them back into the fire."

As deranged as the AirDyne test seems, it isn't an exercise in fitness sadism or a blitzkrieg attempt to build lung capacity. It isn't even designed to train the body. It's a sweaty baptism into Gym Jones's foremost principle: The mind is primary.

▶ NOWHERE TO HIDE
Everyone at Gym Jones, including training director Rob MacDonald (right), takes fitness tests as the group looks on.





IN A STATE KNOWN FOR RELIGIOUS ZEAL, GYM JONES FITS right in. Members are called disciples, and half-assed effort leads to excommunication. Many of the workouts—which range from crushing, hourlong circuits to vicious intervals on the rower or AirDyne—are insanely intense. “Each workout is designed to be a mental crucible, an exercise in the art of suffering,” Twight says. “Through suffering, you discover your true potential.”

Twight has practiced what he preaches. A celebrated mountaineer, he forged his mind-first fitness dogma while setting alpine speed records and claiming a first ascent on a notoriously treacherous frozen waterfall in the Canadian Rockies. “There were guys who were fitter and better technical climbers than I was,” says Twight. “But I did more transformative things because of what I had on board mentally.”

Twight founded Gym Jones in 2003 to help fellow climbers “unfuck their heads.” For years it existed on the fringes of hardcore fitness, gradually adding Special Forces recruits and MMA fighters to its ranks as news of Twight’s successes spread.

Then, in 2006, everything changed. The movie *300* hit theaters, and Twight, who’d been tasked with transforming the film’s doughy actors into a phalanx of hardened warriors, found himself in the limelight. Overnight, Gym Jones went from underground muscle factory to iconic fitness temple.

“Until that point, I ran the gym on the Fight Club model—it was invitation only, but if you were invited, I trained you for free,” says Twight. But after the movie was released, it was impossible to stay off the public’s radar. “The traffic it created nearly crashed our website,” he says. “We went from a few hundred hits a month to almost 13 million.”

The buzz was a curse, in a way. “It gave people the wrong idea. Aesthetics are actually our last concern,” says Twight. Gym Jones focuses on building true fitness, not the appearance of it, he explains. “And true fitness comes from training the muscle that sits in your skull: your brain.”

Most people aren’t prepared for what that entails. “They don’t know what all-out is because they’ve never been pushed to experience it,” says Twight. “Take the one-minute AirDyne test. If someone gave absolutely everything he had on the first try, it would be impossible to log a higher score on the second attempt. What holds people back? Maybe it’s fear. Maybe it’s laziness. But whatever it is, it’s 100 percent in their head.”

Those mental barriers also hinder performance in the weight room. Twight recalls a disciple who was fixated on pulling a double-body-weight deadlift, a Gym Jones fitness benchmark.

(See “Raise Your Standards,” right, for more.) “For him, that was 360 pounds,” says Twight. “He could lift 345 no problem, but put 360 on the bar and he couldn’t budge it. He thought 360 should be hard, so it was.” Twight’s solution: “We had him do a bunch of sets, switching up the plates each time until he lost track of them. Without knowing it, he did a couple of reps at 375.”

IN 1924, THE NOBELIST ARCHIBALD Hill, Ph.D., became the first physiologist to propose that the brain regulates the heart during exercise. That regulation, he theorized, was meant to protect the heart from

THE GYM JONES PLAYLIST

- ▶ **“Power & the Greed”**
The Partisans
- ▶ **“Get Off Your Ass”**
SNFU
- ▶ **“Institutionalized”**
Suicidal Tendencies
- ▶ **“Liar for Hire”**
D.O.A.
- ▶ **“Ain’t Nothin’ to Do”**
Dead Boys
- ▶ **“Bitch in the Pit”**
Body Count

TEST YOUR LIMITS

Most guys think they push themselves in the gym. These tests will show you where your limit really is and help you exceed it.



▶ **1-Minute Sprint**

“A minute might not seem long, but it is if you go hard enough,” says Gym Jones’s Rob MacDonald. “This will reveal how far you’re willing to push yourself. If you’re not crushed at the end, you held back.” **DIRECTIONS** Hop on a fan bike and try to burn as many calories as possible in 60 seconds. (The bike will display your result.) Average is 45; the Gym Jones record is 89.

MASTER YOUR MIND

You’re a lot stronger than you think you are. Follow these tips to break through mental barriers and unlock your potential.



Think Green

“When your workout starts to get tough, you’ll hear voices in your head telling you to slow down, save your energy, and quit,” says MacDonald. “Those are red-light thoughts. They will halt you completely if you don’t learn how to silence them.”

DO THIS

“Fill your head with green-light thoughts, which are wholly positive,” suggests MacDonald. “Repeat statements like ‘I can do this’ or ‘I’ve survived worse.’ That positivity will power you through anything.”

RAISE YOUR STANDARDS

Nothing about Gym Jones is ordinary, including these 10 strength and endurance benchmarks. Set them as goals to elevate every aspect of your fitness.

▶ **RUN 1.5 MILES**

9:00

▶ **RUN 5K**

22:00



► 2,000-Meter Row

"This is a classic Gym Jones test," says MacDonald. "When you do circuits for time, you can cheat form and cut corners. This is just you and the computer: no cheating, no shortcuts—just objective feedback staring you right in the face."

DIRECTIONS Program the distance setting on a rowing machine for 2,000 meters. Try to complete the distance in less than 7 minutes.



► 10-Meter Murder

"This test has you face 'the moment'—the point in a workout when you either persevere or quit," says MacDonald. **DIRECTIONS** Grab a stopwatch and head to a track. Set it for 1 minute and run 10 meters, resting for the time remaining in the minute. Next, run 20 meters, resting for the remainder of the minute. Keep adding 10 meters until you can't beat the clock. Your goal: 200 meters.



► Death by Burpee

"You don't need a gym or any kind of special equipment to take this test," says MacDonald. "All you need is a willingness to suffer and a desire to discover what you're made of." **DIRECTIONS** Record the time you take to do 100 burpees, touching your chest to the floor during the pushup and jumping at the end of each rep. Try to finish faster each time you do it (every few weeks).



Make Friends with Pain

To beat your limits, you have to establish a positive relationship with pain. "When you reach your edge and push past it, you'll realize you weren't really at your edge in the first place," says Steve Portenga, Ph.D., a sports psychologist who's worked with Olympians.

► DO THIS

Spend time in the "pain cave," the point on the intensity spectrum that's just shy of where you'd call it quits. "That will help you adapt to discomfort," says Portenga. Any of the tests above will take you there.



Be Accountable

Gym Jones has four AirDynes, but only one is used for tests. Disciples take turns while others look on. "People would never hit their mark if they did it at home alone," says MacDonald. "No one wants to look like a failure. Accountability ensures they aren't."

► DO THIS

Find a good trainer or workout partner. "These people should not only motivate you to go hard but also keep you from slacking off on those days when you really don't feel like hitting the gym," says MacDonald.



Reward Yourself

For some people, the prospect of a reward is a powerful motivator, says Portenga. MacDonald agrees. When he sets a Gym Jones record, he treats himself to a burger and shake. Enjoying the reward also motivates him to hit the gym to burn it off.

► DO THIS

Determine a reward that excites you, such as a high-calorie meal, concert tickets, or a week off from training. Then set a goal and reward yourself when you nail it. Can't think of a goal? Pick a fitness standard below.

► FRONT SQUAT (1-REP MAX)

1.5x
BODY WEIGHT

► PULLUP ENDURANCE

15
REPS

► ROW 2,000 METERS

7:00

► BENCH PRESS (10 REPS)

105
LB

► TURKISH GETUP (1-REP MAX)

50%
BODY WEIGHT

► RUN 400 METERS

1:00

► DEADLIFT (1-REP MAX)

2x
BODY WEIGHT

► BACK SQUAT (1x BODY WEIGHT)

20
REPS

overexertion. But Hill's idea took more than 70 years to gain traction, having been overshadowed by the more popular theory that physical exhaustion is purely a matter of cellular supply and demand.

Timothy Noakes, M.D., Ph.D., director of the Exercise Science and Sports Medicine Research Unit at the University of Cape Town, was taught the prevailing theory. When he started studying exercise physiology, he says, he was told that your muscles get tired—either because they run out of fuel or build up too much lactic acid—and that's why you stop. But no one had ever proved that muscles were getting too little oxygen or fuel. What's more, studies showed that people never recruited more than 50 percent of their muscle fibers—even during intense exercise, says Dr. Noakes. The theories just didn't seem to match reality.

Eventually it occurred to Dr. Noakes that because you activate muscle by way of your brain, your brain must also be responsible for determining how long, hard, and fast you push yourself. While Hill had been on the right track, the more research Dr. Noakes conducted on his own “central governor theory,” the more the supporting evidence mounted.

To what degree can the governor in your head influence performance? Suppose you were told to pedal to exhaustion on a stationary bike while being timed by a clock. “You're also told that it would be great if you could go for an hour,” Dr. Noakes says. What you're not told is that the clock is slow. “You'll find that when the clock reads an hour and five minutes, you'll stop, even though you really did an hour and a half,” says Dr. Noakes. By taking this cue, your mental governor established a performance limit that in no way reflected your actual fitness level.

“Your brain sabotages your performance,” says Dr. Noakes. “When you feel fatigued [during exercise], it's just an emotion. It has nothing to do with your physical state at all.”

Others agree. When Brazilian researcher Eduardo Fontes, Ph.D., analyzed cyclists' brain activity on an fMRI machine as they pedaled to exhaustion, he showed that emotion plays a fundamental role in performance. “We saw that the limbic lobe—the emotional center of the brain—lit up as the intensity increased and the cyclists became more exhausted,” he says. “The more active the limbic lobe became, the more emotion they tied to exertion and the more they slowed.”

Your mental state, Fontes says, is behind much of the variation in your day-to-day performance. “Anyone who works out knows that training performance can differ drastically from one session to the next,” he says. “Physiologically you might not have changed; what may have changed substantially is your mental state.”

Fontes has found that people who are able to detach from their emotions during exercise—for example, not thinking about their panting breaths or burning legs—almost always end up performing better. “When you exercise or compete, you have to mentally process what's happening to your body,” he says. “But the key is to not judge it as positive or negative; that's when your brain sets limits.”

Dr. Noakes tells the story of a woman running an elite 5,000-meter race. She was about 20 meters behind first place and had mentally committed herself to coming in fifth or sixth. But as she began her final lap, she saw the clock and realized that if she could run that lap in less than 64 seconds—something she had

▶ **THE PAIN CAVE**
Every Gym Jones workout is a test of grit. If you're halfway done and don't want to quit, you're not going hard enough.





“EACH WORKOUT IS DESIGNED TO BE A MENTAL CRUCIBLE. THROUGH SUFFERING, YOU ARE ABLE TO DISCOVER YOUR TRUE POTENTIAL.”

done before—she would qualify for the Olympics. “All of a sudden her thinking shifted and she didn’t care about the race,” Dr. Noakes says. “She had a new goal that mattered on a much deeper level, a goal she believed she could achieve.” She hauled off, won the race, and qualified for the Olympics.

“Your biology sets your true limit, of course, but how close you get to it is determined by what you believe,” says Dr. Noakes.

MacDonald specializes in that kind of focus shifting, which starts with goal setting. “If someone tells me they want to get fit, I ask, ‘Fit

for what?’” he says. “Fitness is task dependent; you need to map things out and set a goal, whether that’s to finish a triathlon or simply to look and feel healthier.”

Everyone who walks into Gym Jones—Navy SEAL or sales rep—receives a customized training program. Nothing is arbitrary. Nothing is left to chance. And the commitment must be total. “You might work hard in the gym, but are you also sleeping eight hours or more a night, eating healthfully, and foam-rolling as you watch TV?” says MacDonald. “Constant attention to your goal is how you reach the next level. And recovery is half the battle: Don’t do the work if you don’t have the balls to rest.”

Such devotion—what disciples sometimes refer to as drinking the Kool-Aid—affects what MacDonald calls a “deep chemical change” that guarantees success both in the gym and beyond. “The swagger that comes from reaching a fat-loss target, crushing a half marathon, putting up a record lift, or passing an endurance test doesn’t wash off with your postworkout shower. It lingers,” he says. Indeed, a man who gives his all to break a barrier in the gym may also be fighting with the same obsessive determination in other aspects of his life: building a happy family, closing a deal, inspiring change in others.

“A breakthrough here can lead to someone being a totally different, more confident, improved person,” says Twight. “We see it every day. We’re seeing it right now on the AirDyne.”

THE 20-SOMETHING GUY IS BACK ON THE BIKE, PEDALING savagely in another attempt at 48 calories. The seconds tick—43, 42, 41—as his face gets redder and his breathing harder.

Eighteen, 17, 16... with 15 seconds to go, his face twists in agony and his eyes close as he digs deeper into the pain cave.

Three, two, one... the timer finally reaches zero and then goes blank. The man collapses heavily on the handles, gasping for air. And then, victory: “49 calories” flashes across the screen. He staggers away from the bike, smiling broadly despite the leg cramps he’s probably feeling as he accepts high fives from everyone in the room.

“If you don’t push your mental limits, you’re just going through the motions and you will stay at a certain level mentally and physically for life,” says Twight. “But if you get comfortable with discomfort, if you put yourself in a dark place and come out the other side, you can accomplish anything.” You just have to believe. ■

▶ THE ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT
MacDonald strides across Gym Jones’s spartan interior, which lacks TVs, mirrors, and other distractions.

