

Fit for the Trail

By Jeff Csatari

You couldn't go camping without your Scout knife, so don't leave home without an even more essential survival tool—a healthy, well-conditioned body. Here's our complete guide to getting fit for high adventure

Once upon a time there was a Scouting volunteer; we'll call him Scoutmaster Cheeseburger (not his real name). He was a dedicated Scouter, a Wood Badge graduate who looked good in khaki and ran one of the most active Scout troops in his council.

But the burgermeister was a tad overweight and out of shape from a sedentary winter and spring. Between his career, family, and troop duties, well, he just couldn't find time to exercise. Something had to give, and, unfortunately, it was another hole on his belt.

Not a happy camper

On the fifth day of his trek at Philmont Scout Ranch, he was not, shall we say, feeling his oats. The trail was tough. His feet ached. At night, lying in his sleeping bag, his lower back felt as if it had been jabbed by an annoying Webelos Scout wielding branding irons.

The Cheese was not a happy camper.

But the worst was yet to come: At about 9,000 feet above sea level, on some dusty backcountry trail, the 45-year-old man was sweating, breathing heavily, and feeling a tightness in his chest.

"Heart attack," he thought. He sat in the shade of a boulder and pondered his wife and kids and the turkey vulture that so fittingly circled above him in the hot New Mexico sky.

Luckily, there is a happy ending to this tale. Our Scouter was suffering from nothing more than fatigue and a bad case of heartburn—no doubt from a second helping of freeze-dried chili mac.

But imagine if it had been heart trouble. Our hero was eight miles from the nearest trailhead. This deep into the mountains, the cellular phone in his backpack would have been useless because there was no repeater within reach of his signal. His life could have depended upon how close he was to medical help.

Avoid a miserable experience

At Philmont, where 135,000 wilderness acres challenge 22,000 Scouts and Scouters each summer, potential medical emergencies like this have occurred often enough to send a wake-up call to future hikers: Be prepared in body as well as in backpack.

"The Philmont experience for those who are out of shape will be a miserable one," warns Dave Bates, former director of the BSA's premier high adventure base. "But it doesn't have to be that way at all—come fit and you'll enjoy a much more exhilarating adventure."

And that goes for any rigorous adventure you plan with your Scout troop or Explorer post. In fact, physical preparation can be even more crucial during individual unit outings, since most wilderness areas don't offer the kind of emergency medical resources you find at BSA high adventure bases.

Philmont's health lodge, for example, is staffed by three full-time medical doctors and a host of medical students; and rangers in the backcountry are skilled in wilderness first aid. Before leaving base camp, you must pass a medical recheck and blood pressure test.

"About 30 percent of adults don't pass it the first time," says Dr. Gene Klinger, a surgeon who has volunteered his summers at Philmont for the past 35 years.

"That's not surprising," Klinger adds, "when you consider the stress these guys have been under—traveling 30 hours on Amtrak while trying to keep boys from being boys, eating bad food at the local beanery, and getting little sleep.

"Then, they get here, where the altitude is higher than a mile, and they shake salt on their eggs and drink three cups of coffee—and expect to pass a blood pressure test."

Blood pressures return to normal by day two for 50 percent of those who fail the first test, says Klinger. And he has to send only 2 percent of would-be trekkers home for health reasons.

But being given the medical green light to hike Philmont doesn't guarantee happy trails to you. Like any sport, backpacking requires training. You wouldn't enter a 10K race without several months' practice under your belt, and high adventure trekking is no less physical. Still, BSA fitness experts say a surprising number of Scouters don't prepare properly.

Get a head start

Fred Rothwell, a Scout leader with Troop 75 of Manhattan, Kan., started riding an exercise bicycle regularly the winter before his first trip to Philmont. A lineman for the Detroit Lions during the 1970s, Rothwell knew well the value of fitness training.

"After going through several football coaches, you can't throw a whole lot at me that would surprise me physically, but I have to say I wasn't quite ready for the constant up-and-down hiking, the giving up of what you had just gained, and the elevation."

Last spring, facing his fourth visit to Philmont, Rothwell was racking up 20 minutes a day on a NordicTrack cross-country ski trainer. "The best advice I can give is, start exercising early," he emphasizes.

Ideally, you should begin in January, a good six months before your trip. (See *The Easy Trail to High Adventure Fitness* sidebar, below.) Safety note: See your doctor for a physical exam before beginning any rigorous fitness program.

The best way to begin is to start walking.

"People have the misconception that they have to walk five miles a day or train for a marathon in order to be fit," says cardiologist James Rippe, co-author of *James Rippe's Complete Book of Fitness Walking*. Walking for 20 or 30 minutes a day at a pace you enjoy is enough to increase your fitness and decrease your risk of heart disease, he advises.

To get your heart pumping enough during exercise to gain the benefits of an aerobic workout, you should maintain a rate that's 75 percent of the maximum heartbeats-per-minute for your age-group.

To figure out your maximum heart rate, subtract your current age from 220. For example, if you're 36, your maximum heart rate is 184, so 75 percent of that is 138 beats per minute.

Stop occasionally during exercise and take your pulse for 15 seconds, then multiply by four to get an estimate of your heart rate. Increase or decrease the intensity of your workout as needed to keep the rate near your target range.

By April you should be fit enough to tackle some overnight hikes. (It's said that nothing gets you in shape for hiking long miles with a heavy pack better than...hiking long miles with a heavy pack.)

Take these tune-up hikes with the same crew you'll be with on your high adventure. "Practice working as a team," suggests Dave Bates. "Everyone working together with a positive mental attitude makes all the difference in the world."

A Philmont-type high adventure outing "is actually 20 percent physical and 80 percent mental," Bates says. And the good news is that physical preparation gives you a jump on the mental side of the fitness equation.

Researchers know that exercise boosts mood and self-esteem, probably by increasing the flow of oxygen-rich blood to the brain. A fit body, experts say, is better able to handle stress. And what's more stressful than being tired, wet, cold, and sore on some mountainside with a bunch of Boy Scouts who are feeling their oats?

Finally, don't stop exercising the day you return from your trek. Let the healthy habits you start during your training become a part of your life style—for life.

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Published in *Scouting* magazine, May - June 1997 issue.

<http://www.scoutingmagazine.org/issues/9703/a-fitt.html#top>

Stretch Your Limits

Outside of aerobic activity, the best thing you can do to prepare for the trail is improve your flexibility. Being limber wards off injury and muscle soreness. Get in the habit of stretching for 10 minutes once a day. Tips: To make stretching routine, do it at the same time each day, perhaps while watching TV; go slow and steady—never bounce and never stretch to the point where you feel pain—and hold each stretch for 30 seconds.

Here are some good stretches for backpackers:

Hamstring stretch. These muscles on the back of your thighs get taut when you sit all day and they tug on the lower back muscles when you stand. To flex them, lie on your back and grab behind one of your knees with both hands. Keeping the other leg flat on the floor, try to straighten the raised leg and pull it gently toward you. Repeat using the other leg.

Calf stretch. Stand about three feet away from a wall. Step forward with one foot, keeping the other foot back. Allow the knee of the front leg to bend. Lean forward as far as comfortable, keeping your back heel on the floor. Feel the stretch in your calf and Achilles tendon. Repeat with the other leg.

Figure-four stretch. Sit on the floor and straighten your legs in front of you. Next, bend your left leg, placing the bottom of your left foot against the inside of your right thigh. Slowly bend forward and reach toward your right ankle. Repeat with your left leg extended.

Two stretches to limber your lumbar:

1. Lie on your back. Lift one knee to your chest, then the other, keeping your lower back flat on the floor. Hold both knees to your chest, then relax. Repeat five times.
2. Lie facedown. Using your arms, try to press your torso up and back as far as possible, while keeping your legs on the floor. Hold the stretch for 10 seconds, then relax back down. Do 10 repetitions.

To keep your back strong for hefting backpacks, strengthen your abdominals with crunches: Lie on your back with your knees bent. Cross your arms on your chest. Keeping your back as flat as you can against the floor, slowly curl your torso upward until your shoulder blades are about four to six inches off the floor. Do three sets of 10 to 15.

The Easy Trail to High Adventure Fitness

"The guys who start getting in shape at the first of the year or before are the ones who get the most out of Philmont," says Philmont doctor Gene Klinger. Here's a modest fitness plan that'll help you keep up with those jackrabbits in your troop come trek time.

JANUARY

- Visit your doctor for a complete physical examination.
- Walk indoors or outdoors for 30 minutes three times a week.
- Stop smoking, if you do. Cut down on your fat intake. Drink 2 percent milk instead of whole milk. Stop slathering butter all over your toast, will ya?

FEBRUARY

- Gradually increase the speed and length of your walks. Mix up some walking with periods of running.
- Stretch your back, calves, and hamstrings (as described in the other sidedbar) every day.
- Eat at least three servings of fruits and four of vegetables a day. Switch from 2 percent milk to 1 percent.

MARCH

- Daily stretching and crunches.
- Walk, run, swim, or cycle three to five times a week for at least 30 minutes per session. At least one session should take you up and down some hills. Or walk up and down the stairs in your house.
- Buy a pair of quality hiking boots and walk in them a few times a week to begin breaking them in.
- Do a few push-ups now and then. A little weight lifting wouldn't hurt either.
- Switch from 1 percent milk to skim milk. Hey, pass on dinner seconds and have an apple instead.

APRIL

- Daily stretching and crunches.
- Walk, run, swim, cycle, or do some other aerobic exercise at 75 percent of your target heart rate for at least 30 minutes four to five times a week. Make sure you are practicing hill walking.
- Take at least one five-mile hike and one 10-miler with a loaded backpack.
- Are you drinking at least eight glasses of water a day?

MAY

- Daily stretching and crunches.
- Walk, run, swim, cycle for at least 30 minutes four to five times a week. Hills, hills, hills.
- Go on one or two shakedown hikes with the group you will be trekking with this summer. They should be three-day hikes of at least 15 miles each. Your backpack should weigh 30 to 40 pounds.
- Are boots broken in yet?

JUNE UNTIL THE DAY YOU EMBARK

- Daily stretching and crunches.
- Walk, run, swim, cycle for 30 to 60 minutes five times a week.
- Right about now you should feel like Superman!