



FORECICH (LEFT) EMPHASIZES VIGOROUS AND DIVERSE MOVEMENT AND ACTIVE PLAY AS A WAY TO MAINTAIN PHYSICAL FITNESS.

SAM FORECICH

Animal Instinct

By Michelle Wallar

Frank Forecich raised his hand, signaling his Tanzanian guide to pause mid-story. Forecich grabbed his camera from the bag under the boat bench and composed a shot of the spectacular forests bordering Lake Tanganyika. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy his guide's stories about the chimps, the baboons and especially Jane Goodall—he really did—but on this 2004 trip,

he wanted to drink in as much of the East Africa landscape as he could on the motorboat ride from the town of Kigoma to the heavily forested Gombe National Park. Forecich, a Seattle-based fitness and martial arts instructor, was there to see for himself why some of our closest relatives in the animal kingdom are so physically fit.

Coming from a professional world replete with clipboards, spreadsheets, heart-rate monitors, pedometers, treadmills and high-tech exercise equipment, Forecich felt something was missing from the realm of contemporary fitness training. His Stanford education in human biology and neurobiology had stoked his curiosity and honed his scientific observational skills, and Forecich was developing a fitness program that not only suited the

needs of modern life, but also incorporated lessons from our collective past.

This unique approach of thinking about human fitness in the context of history and evolution runs counter to today's typical exercise regimen of targeting specific muscle groups and training with machines that allow movement on only one plane.

Although Forecich's ideas are not common in the gyms and fitness centers dotting the country, variations on his theme are used by physical therapists, rehabilitation clinics and even conditioning coaches in the world of professional sports.

In the four years preceding his Gombe trip, Forecich had already made two trips to Africa to observe bushmen hunting. And this trip was the natural next step.

After a long hike, he and his guide heard

the chimps crashing through the brush ahead. They had to race up steep, muddy slopes to catch glimpses of the primates effortlessly climbing, jumping and swinging. As he struggled to catch his breath that day, Forecich was struck by a realization that would become the cornerstone of his evolving fitness philosophy: Exercise—at least as we commonly think of it—is not the key to health; movement is.

"The chimps at Gombe—these animals don't have weights, they don't exercise; they don't do anything that could be called a workout," Forecich says, only half joking. "Yet they were super healthy, super happy and super physically educated."

Forecich has close-cropped, graying hair and a straight, dark mustache atop an easy smile. In a deep, booming voice, he speaks about his childhood. The weak, somewhat clumsy boy with a multitude of vague health problems he describes is far removed from the strong, graceful 6-foot athlete he has become.

Forecich is determined to tackle the increasing frequency of preventable diseases linked to sedentary living. Combining his scientific background with his observations of Gombe's chimps and African bushmen, he developed an innovative approach to health and well-being called "Exuberant Animal," which he launched in 2000. Today, his message seems to be catching on. He has partnered with The National Institute for Play in California, and in March, he gave a keynote address at the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance in Baltimore. Putting his theory into practice, Forecich leads workshops and has also taught physical education classes at Puget Sound Community School, an alternative high school in Seattle.

Forecich says physical training needs to be relevant to human origins, address functional performance and, perhaps most importantly, be fun. To that end, the Exuberant Animal model includes three main branches: primal, practical and playful.

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PRIMAL

Early humans had to find food through hunting and gathering. They often moved with the seasons in order to gain access to various food sources. People in modern America face a completely different set of challenges than those we evolved to cope with, Forencich says.

“We live in an alien environment,” Forencich says. “We are largely sedentary—our food is concentrated by location, so we don’t have to walk or travel as much to collect it.” Exuberant Animal strives to be a guide on how to navigate this environment in ways that promote health and happiness.

He traveled to Africa to observe people who still live essentially the same way early humans lived, and to learn what he could about health. He accompanied Hadza bushmen on a hunt during his first trip to Tanzania in 2000; two years later, he went out with the !Kung bushmen in Botswana in the Kalahari Desert. He noticed that the Hadza bushmen and the !Kung—and later the chimps—were all physically fit.

“It makes sense that they are happy and healthy, because their bodies have been sculpted by that environment,” Forencich says, adding that another common theme is vigorous movement peppered throughout the day. Sometimes that movement is playful, sometimes it’s related to survival, and sometimes it is simply for traveling from one place to another. “If I could get people to do just one thing, it would be to walk more,” Forencich says.

Sometimes however, walking is not an option. That was the problem facing the clients of Corey Jung, a holistic lifestyle and fitness coach in San Diego. Jung came across Forencich’s Website in 2000 and the information helped crystallize his own developing approach to helping his clients heal from debilitating spinal cord injuries. Each of Jung’s clients was working to regain as much function as possible, with the ultimate goal of upright walking.

“Upright, two-legged walking is what makes humans so unique,” Jung says. In order to help individuals regain that ability, he looked back to prehistoric times to understand how and why humans first began to walk upright. And Forencich’s

GAMES

Exuberant Animal classes promote playful community building through numerous games. Other games and more information are available at www.exuberantanimal.com.

KING OF THE CIRCLE

Two people step inside a rope circle roughly 7 feet in diameter. With hands behind their backs, they use hips and shoulders to try pushing each other outside the circle. If one pushes too hard as the other sidesteps, they’ll be out. As soon as one person is out, a new person jumps in the circle.

BUCKET BRIGADE

An equal number of medicine balls are placed in each of two hula hoops situated at either end of the play area. Two teams compete against one another to empty their hoop of balls by filling the other team’s hoop. Players can pass balls or run with them in an attempt to empty their hoop before the competition fills it.

MEDICINE BALL HOOP PASS

A hoop master holds a hula hoop through which two players pass a medicine ball. The hoop master moves the hoop up, down, forward and back to keep the players guessing and constantly adjusting.

SIDEWALK DILEMMA

Two people approach one another at a steady pace on a long, narrow space. The goal is to pass smoothly without breaking stride and without talking.

nascent philosophy helped him fill in the gaps. “[Exuberant Animal] really reconstructs and reintroduces some of those things that have been lost through modern living,” Jung says.

Since then, Jung has taken several classes with Forencich and says he has made a 180-degree turn in his approach to coaching. Now he focuses first on patterns in everyday

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FROM PAGE 142 movements. Increasing efficiency and economy of movement at this basic level leads to more energy and ease, he says.

“If we can move with greater ease, we have a greater resilience, I feel,” Jung says. “The greater our resilience, we’re able to handle stress better. And like I tell my clients, less stress means more life.”

PRACTICAL

The practical aspect of Exuberant Animal is a functional approach to fitness, which takes its inspiration from Vern Gambetta. This legendary strength and conditioning coach has worked with all kinds of athletes, including players on the Chicago White Sox, the New York Mets and the 1998 U.S. men’s World Cup soccer team. Gambetta champions functional sports training—where the focus is to train movements, not muscles.

Instead of isolating one muscle group and moving on a single plane, functional fitness is all about using the whole body through a broad range of motion. Using realistic, real-world challenges and activities forces the muscle groups to work together and increases balance and core strength. Forencich says people can achieve terrific strength along the spine, as well as fluid, flexible movement in the extremities, much like a fly-fishing rod.

“I don’t care much about cosmetics of muscular appearance,” Forencich says. “It’s more about enhancing your functional ability to move well.” And he freely admits that he looks to children for games and activities that fit this model.

“Kids use playful, ballistic moves,” Forencich says. “Their movements are often uncontrolled and explosive.” The key ingredients to the functional approach are vigorous and diverse movement, he adds.

Vigorous movement is important in many ways. The first is that the heart beats faster, pumping more blood to the outer reaches of the body while becoming stronger in the process. “But have you ever wondered how the blood gets back to the heart from the extremities?” Forencich asks.

Movement plays a large role in that as well.

The structure of veins is such that blood

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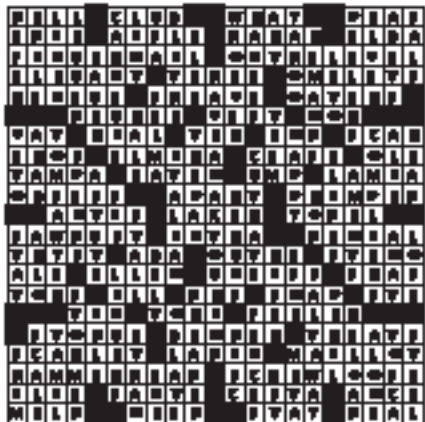
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can flow in only one direction, so once blood is in the veins of the feet, it can only move toward the heart. Muscle contractions that are part of walking, jumping, or bending down and standing up squeeze the veins and help the blood to rise back to the heart. The connection is so significant that the calf muscles are sometimes referred to as the body's second heart. But that's not the only reason vigorous movement increases venous return.

As someone moves faster and with more effort, their breathing also increases. With each breath, the diaphragm contracts and pushes down, lowering the pressure in the chest cavity. This decrease in pressure allows veins in the chest to expand, and blood flows up and into the heart to continue the cycle.

Another essential piece of Exuberant Animal is developing a sense of spinal intelligence and spinal dexterity, Forencich says. The way to do that is to diversify, changing the movements that your spine already knows how to do. "If all you ever do is run or bike, your spine isn't going to get the varied stimulation it needs to remain awake and alert," Forencich says. "Your heart and vascular system may be in great condition, but your spine needs more diversity of motion. For core-body intelligence, you've got to mix things up."

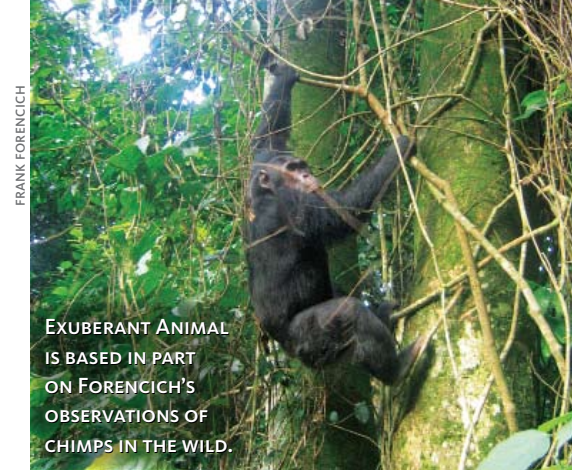
If your workout routine has not changed in months or if it drains your energy and excitement rather than pumping you up, Forencich suggests introducing vigorous, diverse movements.

"Go to the playground and watch little kids," Forencich says. "Steal their moves."

PLAYFUL

Play is fun and makes life enjoyable. Also, because so many animals play, Forencich believes it's vital for good health. Recent studies in neuroscience support his idea.

In one study, published in the journal *Neuroscience Letters* in 2004, rats were divided into one control group—with no exercise—and two experimental groups. One experimental group had a free wheel in their space, which they could use at will. The other had compulsory running on a motorized treadmill. The rats that could



FRANK FORENCICH

EXUBERANT ANIMAL IS BASED IN PART ON FORENCICH'S OBSERVATIONS OF CHIMPS IN THE WILD.

choose whether to run grew more new brain cells than those that were forced to run. In another study published in the journal *Neuroscience* in 2004, voluntary exercise counteracted some of the negative effects a high-fat diet had on learning and memory in test animals. In a study published last year in the *Journal of Neuroscience Research*, researchers showed evidence that voluntary exercise helped promote healing in brains of adult mice after a stroke. Forencich says these are just a few of the studies that point to benefits of voluntary movement, which is further support of play's importance.

Forencich's classes combine community-building goals with lots of balancing activities, games and creative movement. And in keeping with the studies on compulsory movement, all the activities in his class are voluntary. In an average class, students warm up, gently heckle one another with nudges and hip bumping, spar with various martial arts techniques, and spot one another throughout all the activities. They play lots of games and laugh a lot. In doing so, they develop spinal intelligence, promote the growth of new brain cells and gain confidence through movement—all without a thought to heart rate, blood pressure or number of reps.

"The object of my class is vigorous movement with an exuberant spirit," Forencich says. "This sets me apart from conventional training methods. I'm not looking for a particular before-and-after outcome or cosmetic change. If you leave my class laughing and sweaty, I feel like I've done my job." ■

Michelle Wallar is a contributing editor to Alaska Airlines Magazine.