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LIFE | HEALTH | WHAT'S YOUR WORKOUT?

Carl Lewis Doesn't Run, But He Flies on Aerial Silks, Trapeze and Trampoline

The Olympic track-and-field champion's workouts take him up in the air, requiring muscles to pull their weight



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By JEN MURPHY

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Carl Lewis, one of the most accomplished Olympic athletes of all time, never liked running. “I was a sprinter, not a runner,” says Mr. Lewis, who competed in four Olympic

Games and won nine gold medals in the 100-meter, 200-meter, 4 x 100-meter relay and long jump events. “I don’t ever run anymore,” he adds.

Mr. Lewis does, however, still jump. At 54 years of age, Mr. Lewis says tumbling, trampoline and trapeze work have helped him maintain his fitness. “I’m not as lean as I was but I feel as good as when I retired in 1997,” he says.

Mr. Lewis had been biking to stay fit in retirement. But he felt motivated to step up his routine after attending his college reunion at the University of Houston last year. “I was shocked to see so many overweight, hunched-over classmates,” he says. “The only thing you really own is your body. I didn’t want to lose my physicality.”



Mr. Lewis, 54, performs a bird's nest pose. PHOTO: FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Lewis says he found inspiration in a 75-year-old friend, Mary Cullen, who was taking aerial-silks classes, where students climb, twist, spin, drop and contort themselves using fabric curtain sheets that hang from the ceiling. Last September, she invited him to join her.

“I’m hard headed so I skipped the beginner class and went straight to intermediate,” Mr. Lewis says. “I could do the pulling up movements. But the twisting and getting your head to go one way and your leg another was lost on me.”

A WORKOUT WITH LOTS OF TWISTS AND TURNS

Gyrotonics Helps Restore Elasticity and Mobility

by incorporating movements from yoga, dance, gymnastics, swimming and tai chi.

Ms. Cullen and Mr. Lewis have become workout buddies. In addition to silks class, they take Gyrotonics, a workout that stretches and strengthens muscles

Mr. Lewis has been coaching pro bono for the University of Houston track and field team since 2013, and he brings his athletes to aerial classes twice a week. Occasionally, he says, his aerial feats elicit a “Wow, Coach,” from the athletes. “If I can do it, then they

don't have any excuses," he jokes.



Mr. Lewis won four gold medals at the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles and went on to win five more at the Seoul, Barcelona and Atlanta games. *PHOTO: GILBERT IUNDT/CORBIS*

"I think there is an overemphasis on weight lifting in track and field," Mr. Lewis says. "Aerial is a different kind of strength workout. The emphasis is pulling, not pushing."

Mr. Lewis realized he'd move more easily in aerial classes if he lost weight. He started biking more and cut back calories. In one year he has lost nearly 25 pounds and now weighs 185, which is around his weight at retirement.

Mr. Lewis admits he was never a proponent of stretching when he was competing, but as he has gotten older he says he realizes the importance of flexibility. "My goal is to be able to do a split on my 55th birthday next July," he says.

The Workout

Mr. Lewis works out at Vault studio in Houston. Twice a week he takes aerial silks classes. Classes focus on climbing, which requires you to pull and crunch the body up the silk and then wrap it around your foot so that you can stand and repeat.

Mr. Lewis might hold one silk in each hand, pike his legs straight out in front of him so they are parallel to the ground and then climb up the two ropes. The ropes hang 15 feet, and he has climbed 13 feet. "A few 22-year-olds have made it to the top. I'm still mad I haven't," Mr. Lewis says. "I'm working on it."

One skill he has been working on is the "bird's nest." He holds a silk in each hand, inverts to a ball position, slides his shins up the ropes as he extends his legs toward the ceiling



In a warm-up for aerial class, Mr. Lewis does a hamstring stretch. *PHOTO: FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

and
arches his
back.

One day a
week he
does
trapeze.
The first
30
minutes
of class
focus on
stretching

and core work, with 20 minutes dedicated to skills and the last 10 minutes to tricks. Amy Ell, owner of Vault, says it took Mr. Lewis nearly a month and a half simply to be able to curl up and tuck his legs under the bar because he was so inflexible. Now, he might hook his knees on the bar and hang upside down. By the end of class, Mr. Lewis says, he has done a lot of pull-ups.

One day a week Mr. Lewis takes a tumbling class, and one day a trampoline class. He said both focus on stretching for 40 minutes and tricks for 20 minutes. “It’s like being a kid. We’re doing handstands, cartwheels and round offs,” he says. He also does a weekly Gyrotonics workout. “It’s kind of like Pilates,” he says. “You’re working out on a contraption with pulleys and weights and it’s stretching out the muscles and lengthening them.”

Mr. Lewis rides his bike for an hour five days a week, and he will ride 90 minutes to two hours on weekends. “Houston has tons of bike paths,” he says. “Its fascinating to see the city growing and gentrifying right before your eyes as you ride.”

The Diet

Mr. Lewis has been an on-again, off-again vegan for years. He says his current diet is pretty consistent. Breakfast is two poached eggs, two slices of turkey bacon and grapefruit juice. He lives just a mile-and-a-half from the university so he goes home for lunch. He has a cook who prepares homemade soups such as green pea, lentil or sweet potato. Dinner is usually a vegetarian-based pasta such as spinach lasagna or vegetable-stuffed peppers. Sometimes he has linguine with clam sauce, minus the clams. He can do without sweets but says he is a sucker for good french fries and potato chips. If he snacks

in the



Mr. Lewis climbs the silks, wrapping them around a thigh for leverage. *PHOTO: FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

evening, he has mixed nuts and raisins.

The Gear

“I still have a contract with Nike so I go to class styling in Nike gear,” he says.

The Playlist

“I don’t listen to music and I don’t allow my athletes to have it on the track,” he says.

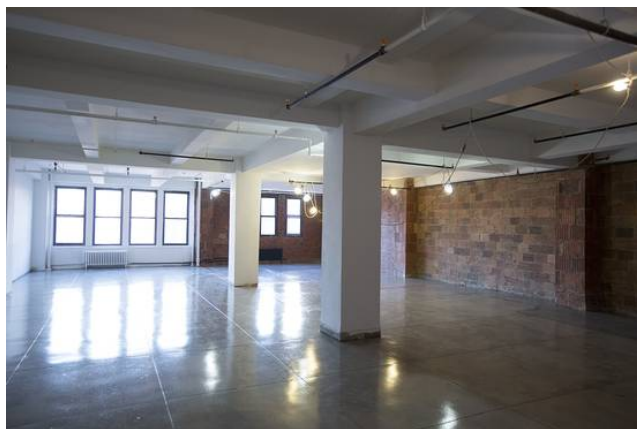
Write to Jen Murphy at workout@wsj.com

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