

# BEST LIFE

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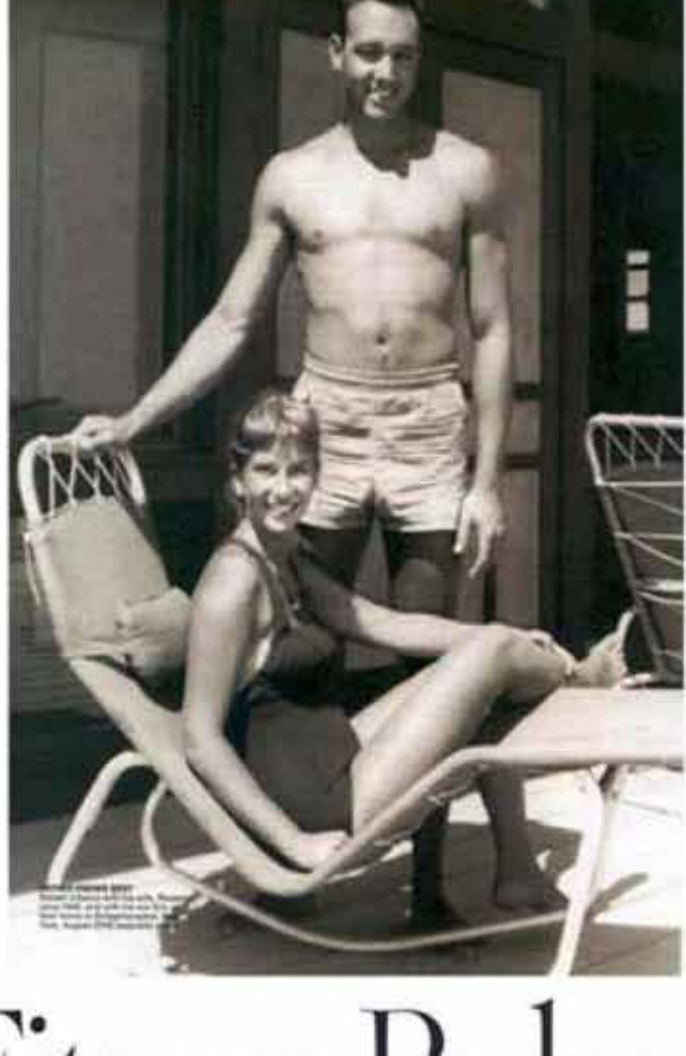
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## My Father's Fitness Rules

When your dad is the national chin-up champion, playtime involves hanging from bars and drills on the Roman chair... and the lessons endure long after childhood

BY ERIC VILLENCI PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRAD DECECCO

**L**ike many teenagers, I looked forward all week to lazy Saturday mornings—you know, the kind where you surf your snooze button until noon. Growing up in my house though, sleeping late wasn't always on the agenda. One of my most vivid memories springs from when I was 14. My game plan had been simple enough: Sleep in, grab lunch, stroll over to Central Park to play football with my buddies. But then a loud rustling awoke me at 7 A.M. Through bleary eyes, I could make out a muscular intruder standing in my room, holding a large object.

My visitor's identity was unmistakable: Dad. Standing in front of the posters on my bedroom walls, he took his place among sports stars and action heroes. There they were: LT, Mark Bavaro, Patrick

Ewing, Conan the Barbarian, and...my dad, Robert Vилленци, 55 years old, wearing his battle uniform: Adidas shorts that John Stockton would judge too short, tube socks, bare chest. In place of a sword, he was holding a (very large) trophy. No, this wasn't the '70s, but that's how Dad rolled—and still rolls. He clearly had something on his mind after his morning workout, but Dad being Dad, I knew I'd have to coax it out of him.

Me: "Hey, Pop, what's up?"  
Him: "Not much, just worked out."  
Me: "Uh, what's that in your hand?"  
Him: "Oh, this?" looking at the five-foot trophy as if I had just pointed out the missing glasses perched atop his head. "Yeah, just won the national chin-up championship...again. You working out today, kid?" ■

**DAD'S OLD-SCHOOL LOGIC IS SIMPLE: NEVER GIVE YOURSELF AN EXCUSE. IF YOU HAVE A ROUTINE THAT DOESN'T RELY ON TOO MUCH EQUIPMENT, THEN YOU HAVE NO REASON TO MISS A WORKOUT WHEN YOU'RE TRAVELING.**

From an early age, my father made exercise and sports not just part of the family lifestyle, but the foundation of our relationship. I gradually became aware that my father was fanatical—and quirky—about fitness. His way of discussing the finer points of exercise has always been more about "show" than "tell." We worked out together every summer. I remember long runs on hot days: me with my new-age Nike Airs that always managed to elicit a look of disdain from my old man, him with his wrist weights and Sauconys that looked as if he'd fished them out of a trash bin. I'd keep up for a mile or two before I fell behind. There wasn't a whole lot of conversation, just the thrum of shoes hitting pavement. Once, on a blazing day, I went out too fast and made the mistake of stopping. Dad saw me walking as he lapped me. He never said anything, but the disappointment etched on his face told me all I needed to know.

**A**près jog, however, the real fun began. Dad always insisted that we live in a home with built-in pull-up and dip bars. He relished his calisthenics routines. He believed that dips were the best upper-body exercise you could do, closely followed by push-ups and chin-ups. He taught me that form is the most important thing to focus on. Dad always talked about how Olympic gymnasts built strength and muscle simply by lifting their own bodies in slow, controlled movements. He made it clear that there's a right way to do things, and that's the way they should be done. He disdained guys who did "curls for the girls" (you know, biceps-for-the-beach kind of thing); for him, fitness was all about real-world applications.

My father grew up in Lynbrook, New York. His father, Maurice, was Scottish and never really developed a fondness for American sports. Dad did, and then some. He went on to play football at Princeton (they actually boasted a Heisman winner

back then), where, as he likes to remind me, they ran the single wing. To this day, when we're watching a game, I can see he doesn't hold the forward pass in much regard. I've mentioned to him that running it up the middle every play might not make for the most compelling viewing, but he just shrugs. It worked for him, so he sees no need for change. After college, he served in the 77th Infantry, where he finished first in the fitness test for his division, among other exploits. In 1961, he took over the family design business, but that didn't soften his physique.

Dad began a regimen of working out 365 days a year, with several twice-a-days thrown in, and he makes no allowances for weather or life's misfortunes (the day of his knee surgery, he made it a point to work out and go into the office). Later, just to keep his powder dry, Dad entered and won several national chin-up championships (only for his age-group, I like to remind him). But it's hard to argue with his results. He's 70 years old now, and bear hugs still thud off his muscular frame. And every birthday, he adds a push-up and sit-up rep to his workout.

I realize I'm not my father, and not just because I can't bang out three sets of 25 chin-ups. The guy has a robotic determination that I both admire and find odd. If he has a 6:30 A.M. flight to catch, he will knock out his complete routine at 3:30 A.M. Honestly? I am going to sleep in and come back strong the next day. In my relationship with exercise, the biggest key is to view it with a long-term outlook. I don't count how many days a week I'm at the gym, but rather how many days a month I exercise. I don't train to hit a certain weight or look a certain way, because inevitably when the goal is achieved, it's binge time. At this stage in life, I know when I am in shape, and you can't fool yourself (or your father).

I like to think I've incorporated the best elements of Pop's routine with some of the new developments in fitness (yes, Dad, there have been some). I like to work with

**THE ROBERT VILLENCI RULES**  
Use these principles to get the most out of your workouts and business trips

**Stick With What Works for You**  
Yes, muscles adapt to specific exercises, but that doesn't mean you should abandon an exercise or a machine. Take the Roman chair. My father swears by it. You don't see them much anymore, but he seeks them out. If you find something that works and it's not causing you pain, stick with it.

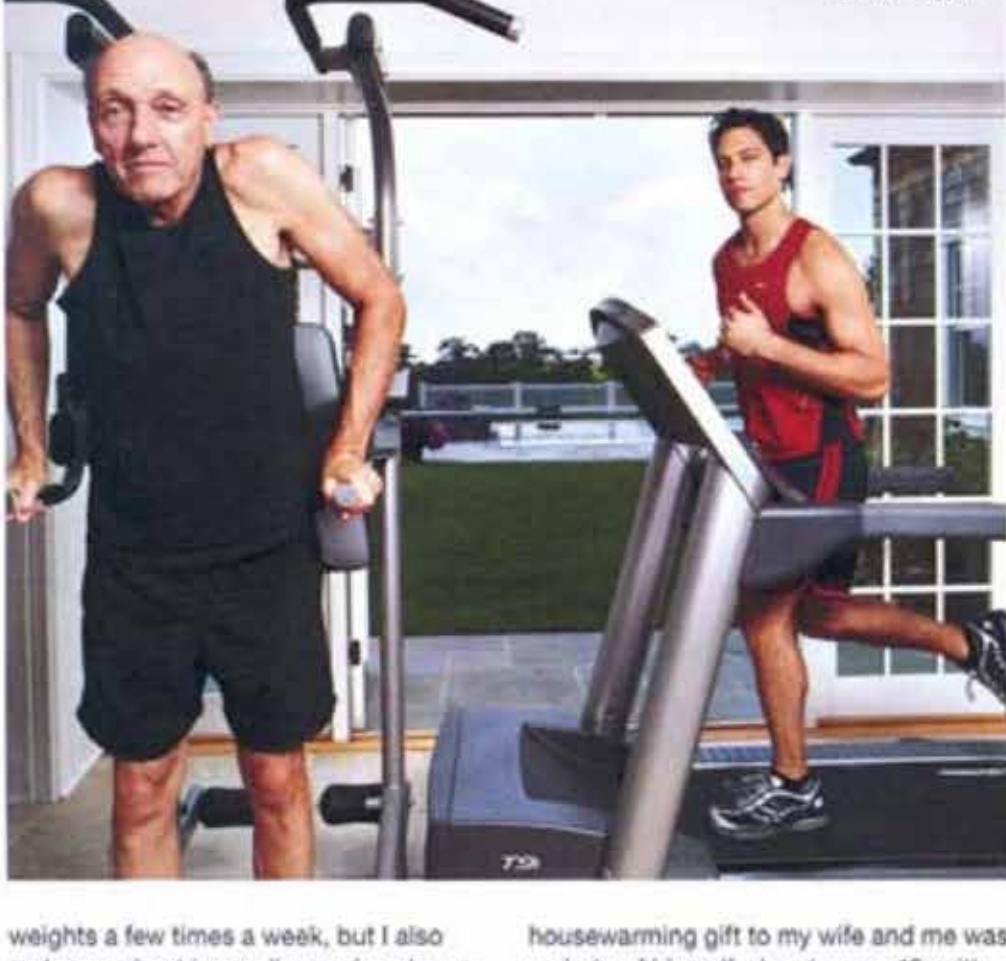
**Go Slow and Steady**  
Slow, controlled movements are the key to working to failure while avoiding injury. My dad applies this mantra to everything from pull-ups to push-ups: a four count on the way down, a four count on the way up.

**Create Your Own Battle Flag**  
Since medieval days, soldiers have been motivated and rallied by the symbols of uniforms and flags. My father's thinking on the subject of attire is that a shirt has no business in the gym or during a run, unless it is winter. If it is winter, you may adorn your logo-free battleship-gray sweats with a white towel wrapped around your neck. Also, why did they invent spandex? And are they planning on making a version for men? Many great athletes, from Jerry Rice to Rafael Nadal, take pride in having their uniforms just so. If you get your gear straight, you'll be surprised how it keeps your head in the game when you suit up.

**Pretend You're in Prison**  
My father taught me to use the solitude of business trips to work out and read. When you're on the road, you're away from the temptation of home (munching hot dogs with your kids and sipping after-work cocktails with friends). A business trip is a good time to go dry and sneak in extra exercise.

**Find Your Mick or Apollo**  
Only the most dedicated self-starters can work out consistently without someone pushing them. Find someone who will help you stay the course, whether it's a buddy or a family member who offers encouragement, or a fantasy of competing against that jerk from the office. Find a way to stay motivated.

**Race Off Jet Lag**  
On the first international business trip I ever took, my father explained to me why he doesn't suffer from jet lag: exercise. He makes sure to get in a run the first morning he's in a different time zone, and then he says he is perfectly in sync. I have been following this advice for a decade, hitting the pavement in countless foreign places, whether it means joining the "Black lung" runners in Shanghai, China, or dodging traffic in Milan, Italy. I always make a point of getting in some roadwork when I'm on the road. *E.V.*



**FAMILY BUSINESS**  
The Vилленциs follow separate but equally challenging routines at their home gym.

weights a few times a week, but I also make sure I get in my dips and push-ups, and I frequently hang from bars. Dad's old-school logic is simple: Never give yourself an excuse. If you have a routine that doesn't rely on too much equipment, then you have no reason to miss a workout when you're traveling. For me, that's a big deal because I'm on the road 60 days a year; I need a workout I can do anywhere and in 30 minutes. To keep it fresh, I also bike, run, and yes, hit the elliptical (even though it looks dumb).

The truth is that now I can outrun my father, but that hasn't stopped him from slinging zingers. His recent

housewarming gift to my wife and me was a photo of himself when he was 18, with his shirt off. Aside from the comic relief it provided, I came to realize it was his little motivational tool, as if to say, "Hey, kid, it's real cushy around here with the wife and child and all. Don't get lazy or I'll rub your nose in the slothlike existence." Rocky gave the Mick. I have my old man.

The flair and strangeness of my father's routines have served as great lessons about individuality and sticking to your

principles, and they filled my childhood with laughs. I now understand he was in on the joke the whole time. Staring down at my young son, it dawns on me: I can't wait to share my fitness philosophy and introduce him to the Roman chair. And yes, kid, shirts really are optional.

Recently, I found myself in Cologne, Germany, on a foggy winter morning. My hotel was close to a park along the Rhine River, and I set out for my 6 A.M. run. Not surprisingly, given that it was the dead of winter, I was alone on the jogging trail. With my iPod blaring, I felt a twinge of American pride as I thought to myself, *Yeah, Germany, this is how we do it in the U.S. of A!* While you guys are sleeping and enjoying your 16 weeks of paid vacation, we're working out! Somewhere between "Eye of the Tiger" and "In Da Club," I heard the bark.

Primal fear stirred, the kind that only antelopes in the Serengeti and foolish American joggers experience. Two German shepherds were racing down the trail straight at me. At this point, I was really sorry about all that U.S.A. chanting in my head, but nonetheless, the canines were closing in. It's a funny thing what one will do when faced with a mauling. I launched myself off the trail and into the river. Luckily for me, the water was only about five feet deep—enough to save me from the dogs, if not salvage my pride. Dripping head to toe and shivering, I made an awkward entry into the lobby of my hotel, mustering a nonchalant nod to the stunned concierge. As I headed up to my room, I could only chuckle as I mouthed my father's inevitable reaction to what had transpired: "So you didn't finish the run?" ■

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**THE "NO TIME? NO PROBLEM!" WORKOUT**  
A superfast, no-frills, total-body plan for the successful man

Remember those days in college when you could hit your chest and triceps one day, and your back and biceps the next? Well, if you're like me, those days are long gone. Once you start juggling a demanding job, a family, and endless hours at the airport, no muscle group has its own special day anymore. Busy guys need fast, effective workouts that hit as many muscles as possible in as little time as possible. That's why I went to trainer Steve Steinberg, owner of Boston's Black Belt Fitness Personal Training, who specializes in creating workouts for guys with no spare time.

"These two circuits [at right] offer a total-body workout. Each one alternates between upper-body and lower-body moves to maximize workout density without overfatiguing the muscles," says Steinberg. The result is more strength in less time. Start with circuit A, moving from one exercise to the next without rest until you've done them all. Then rest for one minute before beginning the circuit again. Repeat with the exercises in circuit B. I don't strive for a certain number of reps, but rather make sure that each exercise is challenging enough to keep my count below 10 [unless I'm doing push-ups, in which case I shoot for 25]. My set is complete when my form starts to falter. The entire workout should take 30 minutes. *E.V.*

- WARM-UP**  
Ten minutes of bicycling, jumping rope, or using the elliptical machine
- 
- CIRCUIT A**  
Push-ups  
Squats  
Dips  
Hanging Leg Raises
- 
- CIRCUIT B**  
Pull-ups  
Dead Lifts  
Dumbbell Chest Presses  
Bicycle Crunches