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I've been a Navy SEAL for seven years and I was a fitness fanatic long before that, but the first time I heard about a Badwater-135-mile footrace through the Mojave Desert in July, in the 120-degree heat- I remember thinking it was the dumbest thing I've ever heard. Then, in 2005, several of the seals I knew died in Afghanistan, leaving behind their wives and children. I wanted to raise money so their kids could someday go to college and find people to sponsor me to run Badwater popped into my head. The only problem was that I weighed 280 pounds from years of power lifting. I somehow managed to run 100 miles in the qualifying race next week, but I gave myself stress fractures and shin splints and I broke all the small bones in my legs. My legs and feet just weren't ready to handle that pressure. If I was going to keep running, I had to lose weight. I started by limiting myself to 1,500 calories a day, mostly protein from eggs, chicken and tuna, and I started working harder than ever before. When the weight began to fade, I consulted with other long-distance runners, read insatiably, and learned that basic strength is the key to endurance. Strong back and strong abs (i.e. core) help tie everything together and give you stamina to push your body to the limit. I always attached basic exercises at the end of my workouts, but I started doing them as soon as I walked into the gym instead. Then, to maximize my muscle mass, which would help me keep going even after I was exhausted, I switched my lifting to focus on reps instead of weight. The pounds continued to disappear. For every 10 pounds of weight I lost, I took 45 pounds of pressure off my knees. Eight months later, when I ran Kiehl's Badwater Ultramarathon, I weighed 177 pounds. I finished fifth and raised \$20,000 for the Special Operations Warrior Foundation. Now I weigh 190 pounds, which I consider my ideal weight. I run daily, pick up several times a week, and do the basic work every day. You may not want to push your body as far as I pushed mine, but you can still build a stronger foundation with five of my favorite basic exercises. You can do this TOO improve the performance of cardio by strengthening the abdomen. Swiss-Ball Sit-Ups Sit on a Swiss ball with your feet shoulder-width apart. Straighten your back. Raise your hands behind your head with your elbows pointed. Slowly recline your back parallel to the floor and then slowly return to the upright position. Make 25 reps for one set, rest for one minute and then make the second set. Increase to 50 reps per set after a few weeks. This will strengthen your upper abs. Swiss-Ball oblique sit on the Swiss ball with his hands behind his head and elbows out. Recline as much as possible back and pause for a hit. Slowly return to the upright. As you come up, twist to bring the left elbow to the right thigh. Pause for a moment and then slowly lower during exhalation. Repeat, bringing your right right to the left thigh. Make 20 reps for one set and rest per minute. Make the second set. Increase to 50 reps per set with practice. This works your oblique and top abs. Russian Sit-Ups Lay on the back. Hands on your head. Lift your left leg six inches off the ground and hold it there. Rest with your right foot on your left knee, so the right knee points straight up. Make 10 squats, keeping your left leg elevated. Then switch to the other side for one set. Make four sets. Increase to 25 reps per set after a few weeks. This will build up your upper and lower abs. V-Ups Lie on the back. You'll last your hands completely. Bring your arms and torso forward while lifting your feet off the ground to form a V shape. Bring your fingers to suit your toes right above your waist. Pause for a moment and then lower your arms and legs. Stop a little less than the floor. Continue at the pace you would use for squats. Do 10 reps for one set. Take a moment. Make three more sets. With practice, increase to 30 reps per set. This will work your lower abs. Broom lean back on the lowering bench so that your torso is at an angle of 45 degrees to the ground. Hold the broom by the neck with both hands, as shown. Twist to the right. Pause when the broom is perpendicular to the floor. Return to the center and then turn left on one representative. Do 10 reps for the set. Take a moment. Make two more sets. This isolates your obliques. Use a 20-pound bar for a more challenging task. As Tim Son said. Navy SEAL David Goggins, 32, ran the Badwater Ultramarathon to raise money for the families of fallen soldiers. He has now completed 16 races over 100 miles long. This content is created and supported by a third party and is imported to this page to help users provide their email addresses. You may be able to find more information about this and similar content on piano.io By Andrew Hetherington for Reader DigestYOU will BE CLIMB UP in that TREE, instructors tell us. All 14 of us. The fact that we've been training almost nonstop for the last eight hours doesn't matter, they say. The fact that it rains is 40 degrees, and the bark of the tree and the branches as slick as the unplowed road doesn't matter, they say. The fact that we are wet, cold, covered in mud, and for fatigue doesn't matter, they say. The fact that the lowest branch on the tree is at least 15 feet above the ground does not matter. All that matters is to quickly stand up to the tree, working as a team. Nothing else matters. We begin the ascent, and one of our rooms, a middle-aged man who drove all the way from southern Africa to do so, slips out of the first branch and comes to the wet Pennsylvania land flat on his back. As he gets, his breath leaves his lungs, as if from amplified Gun. I don't expect him to move, but he grimaces, moans and draws himself to his knees. The instructor helps the guy in his legs. It walks slowly, expanding concentric circles around around Tree. I think, well, so much for tree climbing exercises. But the instructor looks at the ten of us still not on the tree. You have four minutes. It was the 20X Challenge, taught by former Navy SEAL Commander Mark Divine. Part of a series held in gyms across the country, Task promised to teach me that I'm capable of 20 times more than I think I am. 14-hour class will push me toward my physical and emotional limitations, using the same techniques the crucible navy uses to shape its most elite warriors. For several years, as I was approaching my 50th birthday and a front row seat until middle age, I was looking for physical tests. 20X appealed to me because he offered a mental too. Countless studies have shown that mental strength and positive attitudes are vital to success in any field. And I needed to know that I could succeed. But now, looking at the tree, and at the cold, gray sky above it, I'm hedging. Why did I have to do something so exhausting? I thought about two questions I was asked earlier in the day. The first question comes when I do pull-ups. He is asked by a short man in hipster glasses named McCloud. He stands aside from the pull-up bar, barely in my sights. Why are you here, Madden? He asked. Like most 20X instructors, he's a retired cat, which makes him a little scared. I actually thought long and hard about this before I sent in my \$495 and signed a liability waiver. I wasn't there to see if I could handle a SEAL-style workout. I was sure I could get hurt, even though I knew I wouldn't shine. I was a table jockey and suburban dad, but under my belt was a life of rigorous exercise in a variety of disciplines from mountaineering and cycling to open

water swimming and CrossFit. On a recent Sunday morning, when I took a self-driving test to determine if I could meet the minimum physical requirements for the 20X, I passed easily. I was there because I wanted-needed to become mentally tougher. A year earlier I left a comfortable job to start a new website in a crowded, competitive field. Instead of one patient supporting the boss, I now had four demanding. If I cracked under all the pressure (a very real prospect), I would be out of a job without the opportunity to support my wife and three children. Cracking meant failure. Failure meant Madden's children were hungry. That would make me a bad father. So I had to tighten up. I believed that Divine and his people, veterans of one of the most difficult and selective educational processes in the world, would be ideal masters. Also, I liked the fact that Divine offered insight into things you don't necessarily expect from a hard SEAL guy: meditation, yoga, self-awareness, compassion for your comrades Team. As I would like to learn in 20X, each of these parts is just as important for mental strength as the ability to do push-ups and pull-ups. Again, McCloud asks: Hey, Madden. Why are you here? What it has to do pull-up? McCleod asks. I have to be mentally tougher, so I'm the best father for my family. The second question comes about 20 minutes later: Hey Madden, do you want to continue? We did a physical training test to see how many pull-ups, push-ups and squats we could do in two-minute blocks. I struggled through it, not as clearly as I was in my own trial, wondering what the hell was wrong with me. We ran a mile in heavy boots, and I ended up dead last, brought home by Divine, who urged me to tell myself that I was doing well. Say: I got it, he said. I got this. I staggered along, trying out my new mantra, but it didn't work. Now, back at the gym, I puke my breakfast of coffee and granola bars on wood chips at the front door. The instructor offers support in soothing tones. But the sharpness of my retching brings out a new tone, one of anxiety. Madden, he says, do you want to go on? Andrew Hetherington for Reader's Digest It would be so easy to say no. I could leave now before anyone knew my name, saw more of my weaknesses or could appreciate my strength before I could see what it was all about and learn something new. Before I got any of this. I could go home and tell people I twisted my ankle or something and no one would be wiser. Including me. I got it, I tell him. I got it. Let's go. Hours pass. We run, run and run, carried packs and heavy bars. Another participant, a guy named Paul, who is much younger and much fitter than me, runs with his hand on his back. You got it, Madden, he says. If I have one, it's because of Paul's help. We bury ourselves in wet leaves and try to hide from those who are trying to find us. We haul around heavy magazines, take turns carrying each other on their backs in races. and memorize a poem, Invictus, about being the masters of our destiny. Sometimes this fate seems to be related to falling from trees. Every day I notice that I do not feel stronger, but at least I am surprised that I do not feel weaker. Instead of puker, the slowest guy on the run, I now find myself offering support to some of my teammates. Pain, yes, and tired. But far from finished. It's dark by the time they roll up the garage door at the back of the gym and tell us to gather on the edge of the parking lot, over a rock-strewn ravine. I think we have maybe an hour or two to go. Something big and bad must be. But I got it. The divine has us stand by the attention and explains that we all have to go down to the ravine to find the stone that represents our will to live and then bring it to the parking lot. We stumble on rocks that range in size from pieces of gravel to boulders. I'm looking for the biggest darn rock I can find. Because I know I'm not going to and I'm not going to be broken, and that if things get bad, I can lean on the other guys. I find a monster nodules, but whether it's the size of a rock or or activity of the day, I can't get it up the hill. Weird. Back at CrossFit, I can throw around a 125-pound sand bag. I look at the rock as if my gaze will make it levitate. It's not that. Come on, Madden, says McLeod from above. I move this rock that represents my will to survive, I tell him. Under his breath, in conspiratorial silence, he tells me: Find a lesser, you (idiot). You have to carry it for a mile. Aaa. Grand final. I find smaller, about 75 pounds, I guess. My will to live remains huge but more portable. Then comes the order: we will pick up the stone and start walking. If any of us fall off a rock, we'll all start over. No problem. What's a mile? But first we take turns plunging, head and all, in a barrel of ice water. We help each other go up and down; We duck under and exhale until the bubbles show. Helping each other keeps our minds trembling. Lance Cummings, another instructor and former Navy SEAL, stands behind the barrel to make sure we're all way under and under for a good long time. When some of the trembling gets out of hand, they have us stand in the crowd, the bellies and chests of the big guys prepared for the backs of the small ones. Heat is transmitted as if it were wired. I'm in the back, my girth is finally helping my teammates. I noticed that my breasts were snuggled up to Paul's back. The tremor stops. We carry stones as we take laps around the building. We stay together, calling each other. There is a lot of moaning, screaming, and shifting rock from shoulder to shoulder and from waist to back as we look for a comfortable place to rest our burden. We stumble through the darkness, the glare of sodium lights bathing us in pink. Wet, crackling, suddenly no longer cold. We finish, and the Divine tells us to take a knee next to our rocks. He slowly comes to the end of the line opposite me and says: I want you all to think about the answer to this question: What is the most important thing you learned last year? I thank God that I'm on the other end of the line. I know I have to listen to my teammates, learn from their answers, and one small part of my brain does, hearing them talk about never stopping, never quit smoking, but I can't think of anything to say. Is my answer something from the last 14 hours? The last seven months? About hard work and struggle and be smart, not quit smoking and stay true to your word to promises, even if they were unspoken? My mind races, but my mental tires spin in the mud of my fatigue. Madden? Divine in front of me. What is the most important thing you learned this year? I wish I could say that it was a carefully constructed thought. I wish I could say that my brain played, in an instant, a two-hour film about my children, my wife, my family, my colleagues, my brothers and sisters, and everyone who has ever helped me and whom I have ever helped. All the people I love and who love me. I wish I could say that my fine, mind set the thought. But I don't know where it came from. I just blurted it out. Love is the answer, sir. Divine scares me by looking at me through the cold fog of February night. He must think I'm wearing it. Who talks to a Navy SEAL about love? He made me take another lap with a rock. And that's fine. At this point, I know I can do it. I wouldn't want to, but I can if I have to. Because at this point, I know that my answer is correct. Love is the answer. If I didn't love my family, why would I do that? He's still looking at me. Outstanding, Madden. Outstanding. Turns out we're not done yet. We went back inside and worked with magazines trying to read Invictus from memory. We got it. Stephen Madden is the author of Embrace Suck, which will be published this fall by HarperCollins. Harper Collins.

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