

WHEN A WEEKEND WARRIOR JOINS ÜBER-FIT FLAME ANDREW FERENCE FOR TWO DAYS OF TRAINING, THE "NO PAIN NO GAIN" MANTRA HITS A WHOLE 'NOTHER LEVEL

TRAINING DAY

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The large chunks of limestone rubble along Cougar Creek make for a hazardous morning run.

COMPARED TO ANDREW Ference, I'm a pylon. That every defenceman playing pro hockey is fitter than me is a no-brainer, really. But the Flames' blue liner is, at 27 and seven years into his NHL career, a conditioning savant, who recently signed a three-year contract extension. He's the kind of guy who makes you wince just by telling you what he does to stay in shape. He's the kind of guy who takes his road bike on summer vacation so he can climb the infamously tough Alpe D'huez leg of the Tour de France (which he did this past June, in an hour and three minutes). The kind of guy who regularly tries to wear out world-class athletes like Olympic skier Thomas Grandi and Jarome Iginla — Ference's summit mate atop the Flames' training camp fitness test results the last couple of seasons.

I'm the kind of guy who, having accepted this writing gig a few weeks shy of turning 30, takes a long, hard look at his shirtless self in the mirror and laments the fact that his physique owes more to swilling beer than sweating bullets. I'm the kind of guy who probably spends more time plotting potential exercise regimens than executing them consistently. The kind of guy who really shouldn't be trying to shadow Andrew Ference during a couple of his workouts in Canmore's great, gruelling outdoors, but that's trumped by the fact that I'm also the kind of guy who digs doing things he knows he shouldn't.

DAY 1: LEGS, AD NAUSEUM

For the first 20 minutes of our first two-hour session, I manage to keep up while mimicking Ference's warm up and agility drills on the pavement just outside the Canmore Nordic Centre's weight room. I get the gist of his fitness foundation early: balance, core strength, precise and explosive feats of pure athleticism. And then, also earlier on than I expected, I get a lesson in what exactly it means to *not* embody those virtues.

After three supersets of barbell squats and tuck jumps, Ference introduces me to something from the four centimetre-thick Flames training bible called "deep skating hops."

Starting from a single-leg squat, you leap hard and high and land on your other leg, >>





Clockwise from top left:

Sprinting up flights of stairs causes Rumble to collapse in cardiovascular agony while Ference looks fresh as a daisy.

Balancing for 18 metres on an uphill stair railing completes the exhaustive leg workout.

A jump into the Bow River caps the day and ices the aching quads.

Squats, squats and more squats, this time on a bridge over the Bow.

Ference blazes up all 164 stairs at a time while Rumble brings up the rear.

conditioning that enables a guy like him to chase around a nimble power forward on blades and Gatorade. The first time I try sprinting at full speed up three flights of 26, 58 and 80 wooden stairs, I almost black out at the top of the canopied pathway, where Ference is bent, panting and grinning. I cut my climb in half for the next four runs (while Ference blazes up all 164 stairs each time), and I collapse on the forest bed in cardiovascular agony after every sprint, trying to fathom pushing myself this hard while training solo.

When I ask Ference about that, after a post-stair sprinting dry heave and some exercises to finish off our legs (including balancing for about 18 metres on an uphill stair railing near Canmore's water treatment plant — which I actually accomplish with surprising resilience), I can empathize with his answer: "There's always in the back of my head that fear that somebody's doing it harder or somebody's doing it better . . . doing it more. I think if you have that fear and you're out here by yourself, it just kind of pushes you to get up and do that extra ride or do that extra sprint or whatever it is."

But as my legs quiver and twitch on the drive home after a second taste of the Flames' most well-conditioned defender's idea of physical exertion — even after bridge jumping into the Bow River to cap the day and quickly ice the quads — I'm happy to not be haunted by the same spirits when I work out in the woods. **■**

ease back into another single-leg squat and repeat. Ten on each leg, three times, paired with sets of standing dumbbell rows. After that, Ference throws a half Swiss ball on the floor and we begin jumping on to it from one leg, landing on the same leg and balancing, then adding in more single-leg squats — one with leg extended forward, then one with leg back. And it's after that, one set into crossover quad step-ups on a two-foot table, when I realize that I'm drenched in sweat. Too much sweat.

I get through my second 10 and move toward the weight room's open door, which gazes east across the Bow Valley at sprawling woodland, gnarly grey peaks and a clear blue sky above. As Ference finishes his third set, bile rises to my palate and my throat tightens. I hold up my index finger, walk outside and throw up all the water I've been chugging for the past half hour — thankfully, I was smart enough to skip breakfast. Then I walk back inside and finish my set.

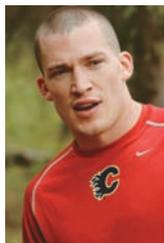
By the time we're done in the weight room, I'm already well spent. But from there we cruise over to the two-kilometre hill that snakes up

the benchland to silvertip golf course, where Ference does road bike sprints up the sharp incline for intervals of two-and-a-half minutes, two minutes, one-and-a-half minutes, and so on. Following a sputtering, sluggish first climb while Ference storms halfway up the hill, I reduce my goal to keeping his bike in view. But I lose sight of his constricting calves — which look like fat knuckles on tree trunks — on every chase but the last 10-second dash.

**DAY TWO:
EVEN MORE LEGS**

The large hunks of limestone rubble that bookend Cougar Creek make for easily the most hazardous terrain I've ever tackled during a morning run. But this exercise — vaguely following Ference's route while leaping from precarious, slanted boulder to precarious, slanted boulder, up and down the 10 feet or so of pitch between walking path and creek bed — is as much about sharpening mental agility as it is about getting the leg muscles firing.

And then Ference shows me the burn that we're igniting them for — the sort of



FERENCE'S TOP FIVE CONDITIONING TIPS

1. "Eat organic and drink lots of water."
2. "Get eight hours of sleep."
3. "Listen to your body, know when you can push hard and when you have to let off the pedal a bit."
4. "Always finish your task. If you say you're going to go for an hour bike ride, finish the hour. If you say you're going to make it to the top of the hill, make it to the top of the hill. You have to have accomplishments."
5. "Have fun . . . if I was just lifting weights over and over and over again, I'd hate it. You've got to try new things and push your comfort level sometimes and get out of the box, and that keeps it fun and keeps you coming back to do more of it."