





NATURAL SELECTION

Who needs treadmills and weights machines? Natural movement guru Erwan Le Corre says you can get fit enough to face any challenge by using movements that have helped humans to survive for thousands of years >

Words Joel Snape Photography Tom Miles



rwan Le Corre is dragging a tree trunk up a miniature waterfall. In some places he props it on his shoulder and heaves it forwards. In others, he

braces his back against the surrounding rocks and shoves. At one point, he leaps upwards to grab a handhold, then lands with both feet firmly planted on slippery rocks, in swiftly swirling water.

One thing stays the same – however much he pulls or pushes, he’s always perfectly balanced, never looking worried that he’s going to lose control of the giant chunk of wood. When he gets to the top, not even really breathing hard, he gives the log a push with his foot, sending it splashing back downstream and crashing into the pool below.

This is a perfect demonstration of MovNat, Le Corre’s system of physical conditioning. Le Corre smiles down at me, looking like a chiselled French Tarzan. ‘Now you try,’ he says.

Resistance movement

I’ve come to a remote village in Corsica to experience MovNat. Though the log task combines elements of climbing, balancing and deadlifting, being experienced at each skill independently isn’t enough to ensure success, as I find out on my first, failed attempt. It also demands imagination and problem-solving: the key to this challenge, it turns out, is to float the log in the water until it’s perfectly balanced on your shoulder. And it isn’t something you’d do with a stopwatch, or as a regular workout, or even the same way twice. On my third go, although I still slither up the wet rocks far less gracefully than Le Corre

did, a change of tactics helps hoist the log up the falls. Well, about halfway up.

I don’t feel too bad. Le Corre not only started young, but he’s also part of a Gallic fitness tradition that dates back to the early 19th century and fitness pioneers Francisco Amorós and Georges Hébert. In 1817, Spanish-born former military officer Amorós created Paris’s first gymnasium, the *Gymnase Normal*, where he trained hundreds of soldiers and firefighters with bodyweight exercises designed to help them survive their demanding jobs.

In 1902, French naval officer Hébert helped to co-ordinate the rescue effort after the town of St Pierre in Martinique was engulfed by a volcano and the experience – along with Amorós’s influence on French physical culture and Hébert’s own observations of indigenous tribes’ approach to movement and exercise –

‘Be strong to be useful? Sir, yes sir! Be strong to be a cog in the machine! Why not be strong to be free?’

convinced him of the need for a fitness regime that would be useful for survival.

Hébert created *La Méthode Naturelle*, in which training typically consisted of a lengthy obstacle course ‘during which, one walks, runs, jumps, progresses quadrupedally, climbs, lifts, carries, throws, fights and swims’. Le Corre isn’t strictly trained in *La Méthode Naturelle*, but when he was young his father encouraged him to climb trees and swim – ‘to do all the things he himself did as a child’. In his 20s, Le Corre trained in everything from sailing and Olympic

weightlifting to trail running, Ironmans and Brazilian jiu jitsu. He cites both Amorós and Hébert, who he discovered in his early 30s, as influences, but disagrees with Hébert’s motto, ‘*Être fort pour être utile*’.

‘Be strong to be useful?’ asks Le Corre, snapping into a drill-sergeant salute. ‘Sir, yes sir! Be strong to be a cog in the machine! Why not be strong to be free?’ He maintains that modern *Méthode Naturelle* has stagnated, and that MovNat represents an evolution that Hébert would happily endorse.

Survival skills

Both *La Méthode Naturelle* and MovNat emphasise movements that could come up in a survival situation. ‘We’re not training body parts, or even physical qualities – we’re training to perform tasks that involve natural movement,’ says Le Corre. ‘Things that are useful whenever there is something at stake.’ A pull-up would qualify, for instance, because it could help you clamber to safety. Walking along an unstable log, improving your fighting skills or learning to swim more efficiently would fit the bill for similar reasons.

In environments where there’s no immediate peril, Le Corre stresses the importance of ‘situational awareness’, or imagining how you’d apply the skill you’re practising to a dangerous situation. With no giant boulders to leap between or caves to crawl through, you could happily practise your precision jumping between markers on the ground, or crawl as if you’re in danger of scraping your head on a stalactite.

For training purposes, Le Corre also makes a distinction between what he calls ‘essential movements’ and ‘variations’. The deadlift, for instance, is an essential movement – the most efficient way of picking something up off the ground with a minimal risk of injury. Other essential moves

DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY

Putting together a MovNat workout isn’t as simple as shinning up the nearest tree. Here’s how to plan your routine



Step 1 Warm-up

Warm up with easy moves such as walking variations, small jumps or moving around on all fours. Think about how your movements could help you in a survival situation.



Step 2 Individual movement

Now’s the time to work on individual skills that you might be weak at, or lift weights that would be too dangerous to attempt in the middle of a combo.



Step 3 Combo

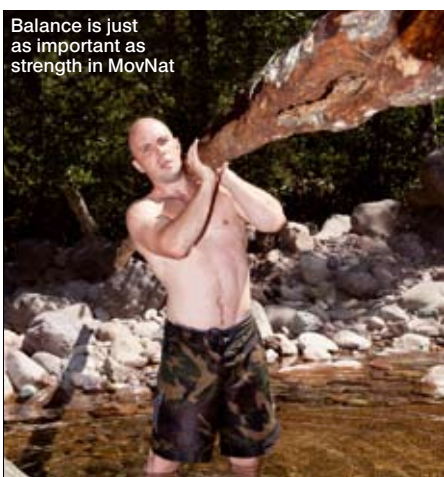
Finally, mix the skills you’ve learned into a longer combination. Time yourself if you think it’ll be motivating, but it isn’t essential. ‘People want benchmarks to compare themselves to others, but that’s when you get in trouble,’ says Le Corre.

Where others may see a smooth and unclimbable rock, Le Corre sees freedom to move as he wants

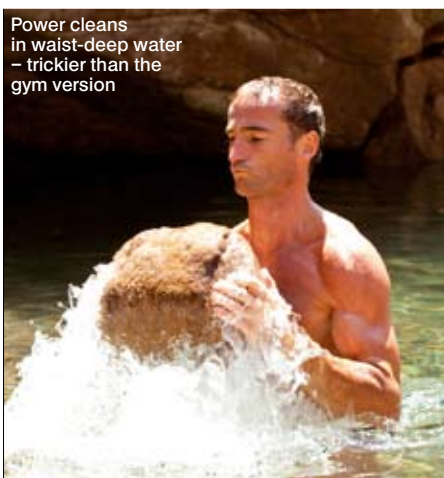




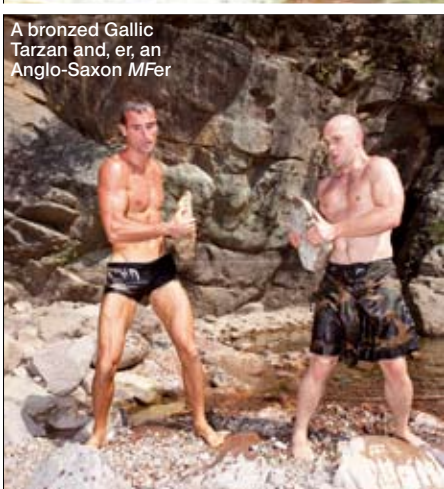
MF's Joel (centre) clammers after Le Corre with MovNat disciples Giuseppe and Zoe



Balance is just as important as strength in MovNat



Power cleans in waist-deep water – trickier than the gym version



A bronzed Gallic Tarzan and, er, an Anglo-Saxon MFer

include the correct ways to land from a jump and climb onto an obstacle. Once you've learned these, you can practise 'variations' such as deadlifting on uneven ground or combining a series of jumps. This is part of what distinguishes MovNat from workouts such as those popularised by CrossFit.

'CrossFit has ten criteria for fitness, including things like "accuracy",' Le Corre says. 'But they do nothing to promote it. If you do one hundred box jumps, you get better at doing box jumps, but you aren't training accuracy. I practise jumping at different heights and distances, across different obstacles.' He's also keen to distance MovNat from the superficially similar discipline of parkour, which he regards as a bunch of teenagers showing off on video. 'They restrict themselves to running, jumping and climbing,' says Le Corre. 'But what about fighting, throwing, carrying? You need to work on everything.'

Rock hard

La Méthode Naturelle courses could stretch for a kilometre without repeating a move, but MovNat encourages 'combos', circuit-style training both for intensity and the refinement of specific moves. My first combo, for instance, involves walking lunges on a log ('This is how you'd walk if you were carrying a heavy load, with a low centre of gravity,' explains Le Corre) followed by two jumps, a scramble across rocks on all fours, then three Olympic-style clean and jerks with a medium-sized boulder. Eight times.

On my first few goes I'm fairly awkward. By the end, even though I'm exhausted, I'm managing to go straight from the jumps to the scrambling. Afterwards, we dive into the closest pool, drink water straight from a nearby stream and munch on berries picked from a bush.

The next day, my combo includes medicine-ball-style press-ups on a handy rock, core twists with a boulder and a burst of front crawl through a mountain lake. The day after that, it's a series of jumps across a beachfront rock formation, followed by a set of heavy deadlifts and an underwater swim as far as I can manage, followed by crawling back to the rocks on knees and elbows.

In between workouts, Le Corre constantly challenges me to balance on precarious perches, heft tree trunks or play catch with rocks the size of my head. He encourages me to hike barefoot to strengthen my feet, and works on my running style: apparently I stride forward too far, which is inefficient and shows that I've been relying on heavily padded trainers too much. He's disdainful of the trail mix I've brought to snack on – 'Sulphur dioxide and too much added sugar' – and we go to the supermarket to stock up on fresh vegetables and fish. We even have a brief fight because Le Corre, a former national karate champion, regards self-defence training as a key part of his system. I lose, obviously.

Close to home

Idyllic as our surroundings are, Le Corre is keen to point out that access to a beautiful



'Parkour is restricted to running, jumping and climbing. What about fighting, throwing, carrying? You need to work on everything'



Corsican hillside isn't necessary for MovNat. 'If you train in a gym but practise the right movements, you can train in MovNat,' he points out. 'On the other hand if you go into the woods and do biceps curls with a rock, that can't be called training in a natural way.'

Le Corre himself travels around in a van stuffed with Olympic bars, weight plates and heavy bags, which he uses to set up impromptu workouts wherever he goes. He shows me video footage of himself doing a two-man workout with a friend, in which they haul a 100kg barbell across a man-made obstacle course. One of his trainees, an Italian called Giuseppe, tells me that they recently worked out in an upmarket hotel, 'doing sprints down the corridor, jumping between chairs, everything'.

It's not long before I get my own taste of Le Corre's train-anywhere philosophy firsthand. Passing a children's obstacle course, he points at a 2m-high beam and challenges me to climb it. I just about manage, mainly because I've recently been doing 'muscle-ups', an explosive combination of pull-up and dip. Le Corre duplicates my climb with ease, then demonstrates variations on ropes, wires and a raised platform.

Finally, we stop by a beachfront café owned by some of Le Corre's friends, where he occasionally trains because of its fortuitously-positioned ledges. He demonstrates one of his own workouts, carrying a 40kg punchbag over one shoulder as he tiptoes along a narrow wall. Passers-by stop and stare.

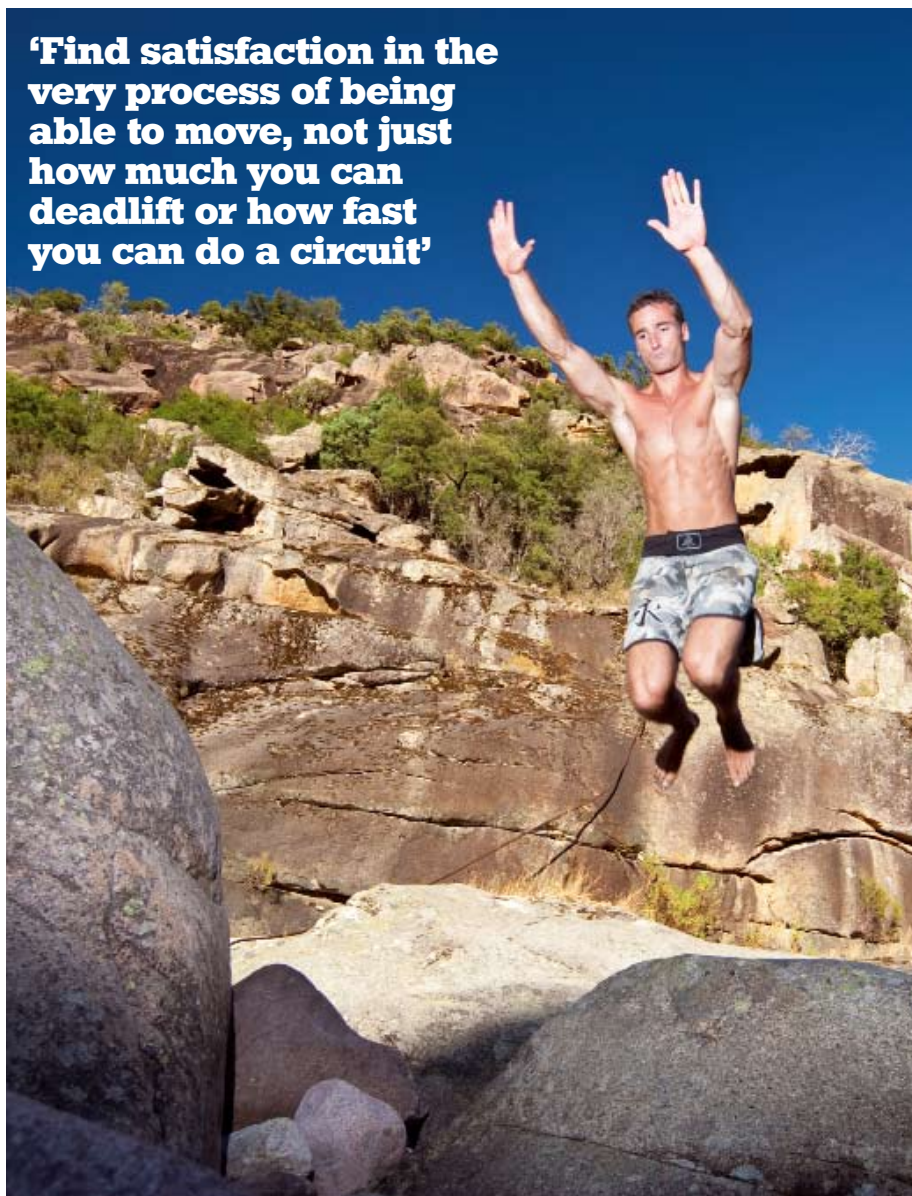
Back to nature

So is this the start of a fitness revolution or just an interesting workout system with a charismatic frontman? Le Corre has already conducted dozens of seminars, including one week-long session in which he taught the system's philosophical and physical principles to six trainers from British travel company Wildfitness. 'About 50 per cent of our course is now MovNat-based,' says Wildfitness founder Tara Wood. 'Our mission has always been to take what we call "zoo humans" and turn them into real humans, but Erwan's developed the whole idea along precise methodological principles. He's a very inspiring example.'

For others who want an instructor certification, Le Corre is currently planning the first open course, set to happen in 2010 – he's had nearly a thousand enquiries, and his inbox fills up with more every day. Finally, he's planning the first MovNat gyms, which is a less contradictory idea than it sounds. 'Scalability is rare in nature,' points out Le Corre, who plans to fill his workout spaces with adjustable beams, boxes and bars to allow trainees to work on their essential movements en masse and in relative safety. 'They'll be like huge play areas, not gyms.'

In the meantime, MovNat certainly works for me. In the days after I get home, I head for the park to practise clambering and precision-jumping around the local adventure playground. I take my shoes off and work on my barefoot running form, and hit my gym's pool to practise swimming in a more efficient,

'Find satisfaction in the very process of being able to move, not just how much you can deadlift or how fast you can do a circuit'



streamlined way. I do get some strange looks – which, Le Corre warned me, is the biggest obstacle to practicing MovNat. 'It requires a real motivation to train in the open. People usually think you're showing off.'

Magical realism

Le Corre hopes that in the future, people will recognise MovNat just as they would recognise yoga, tai chi or parkour. In the meantime, he offers the following advice.

'Find satisfaction in the very process of being able to move, not just how much you can deadlift or how fast you can do a circuit. If that's all you look for, it becomes a dogma or an obsessive quest, for sure you're going to lose pleasure at some point. For me, I just enjoy movement.' And with an endless variety of skills to practise and perfect, the fun of moving around in the way the human body evolved to, and the happy side effect of looking like Tarzan, it's easy to see why. ¶

MOVE TO SURVIVE

Can't make it to a MovNat seminar? You can still work on natural movements

Running

MovNat focuses on POSE-style running, which advocates short strides and landing on your midfoot. Learn more about the technique at posetech.com.

Swimming

Terry Laughlin's Total Immersion Swimming (totalimmersion.co.uk) practises a version of front crawl that focuses on efficiency – perfect for distance swimming and open water.

Fighting

Le Corre practises Muay Thai for striking and Brazilian jiu jitsu for grappling. Most mixed martial arts gyms will offer classes in both.

Lifting

Focus on movements that will enable you to shift big weights around efficiently. Deadlifts, power cleans and Olympic lifts are all MovNat staples.