THE JOY OF AXE

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COMPETITION

WHAT YOU CAN LEARN ABOUT CHOPPING WOOD, PERFORMANCE UNDER PRESSURE, AND THE EVOLVING NATURE OF MANHOOD FROM

MATT COGAR

THE NATION'S CHAMPION LUMBERJACK

PAGE

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COMPETITION

THE GREATEST AMERICAN LUMBERJACK IS TELLING A

tale—a tale about where he comes from, a tale about discovering his father's ax. Age 2 and diaper-clad, toddling along the yawning, verdant yard of his childhood home in a West Virginia valley bound by a shallow creek and overlooked by mountains, he made his way to the outbuilding where his father kept his tools. Finding the axes, he hoisted one, barely holding it perpendicular to his chubby thighs. Satisfied with his feat of strength, he put it back and returned to the house without noticing the fillet of skin he'd sliced from his left quad. "Matt, what did you do?" his mother, Agnes, asked, and the Greatest American Lumberjack looked down, saw blood, and bawled his eyes out.

COGAR'S AX HACKS

HANDLE ▶ YOU WANT THE DURABILITY OF AN AMERICAN HICKORY HANDLE. THE GRAIN RUNS PARALLEL TO THE BLADE.

STRENGTH

Today Matt Cogar hoists his own axes, along with his chain saws and his 6-foot crosscut saw. He keeps them on his parents' land, in a shed near the house built by his father, Paul. Next to the shed is the creek, and on its bank lies a nest of chopped white pine, evidence that Cogar eventually did learn to wield an ax—a skill he's demonstrating on this sunny July morning. From a pile of pine logs, Cogar selects one that's about a foot in diameter and affixes it to a chopping stand 6 inches high. Out of a quiver of 30 axes, he picks his 88—an ax with a steel head 8 inches long by 8 inches wide. He quickly cuts flat footholds at each end of the log and stands on it, balancing his 6'4", 245-pound frame.

Cogar attacks a white pine log in the "hot saw" competition: one cut down, one up, another back down.

MATT LEHMAN (competition badge)

Cogar takes several seconds to visualize his swings, his body braced. Then he raises the ax high and lets loose. The blade crashes into the log, the crackle of splintering pine vanishing into the hushed air. It takes him 18 swings and 22 seconds to chop the log in half. Arms coated with sweat, he picks up the shards and chucks them onto the mound.

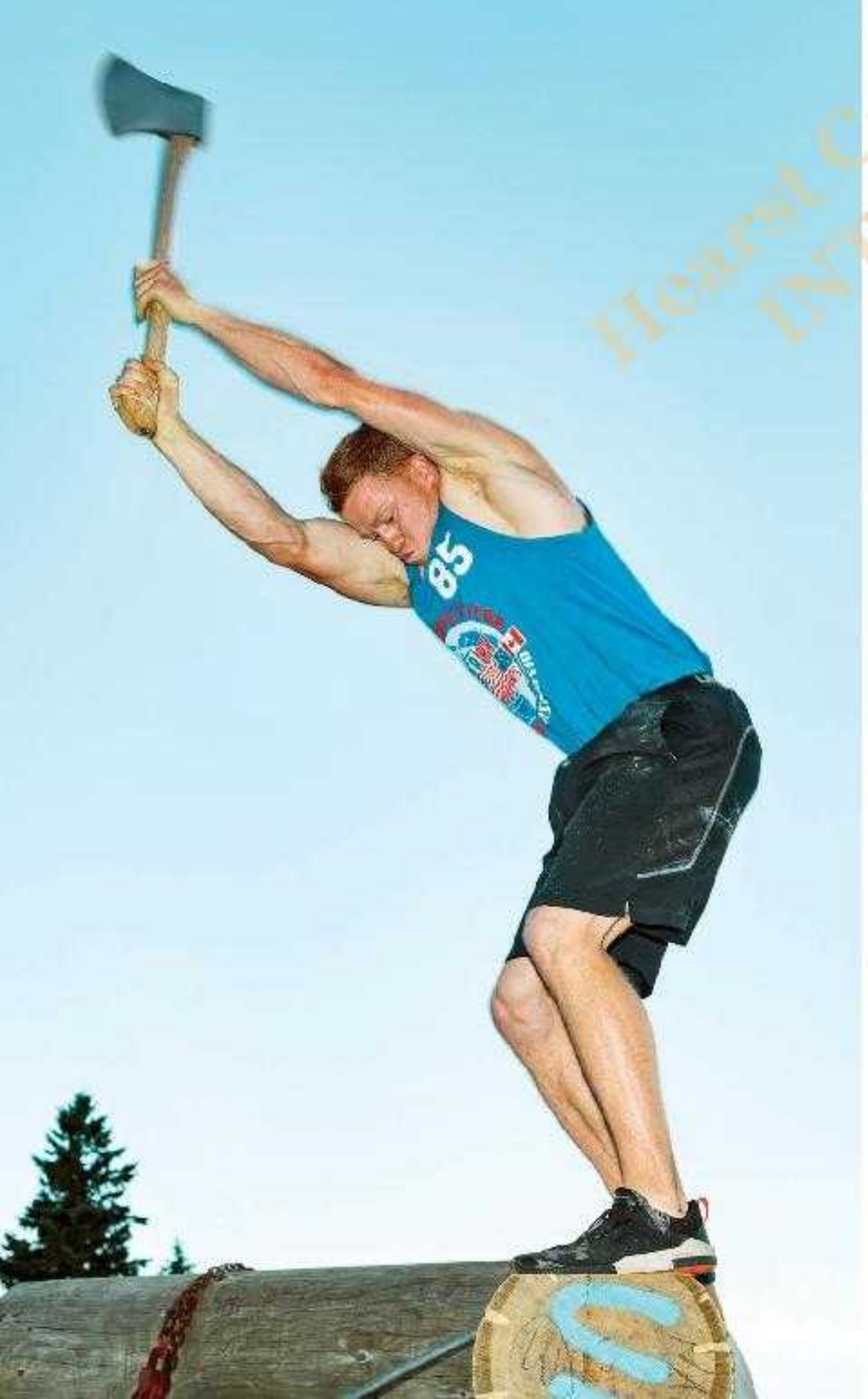
Chopping a log in 22 seconds would be an irrelevant skill were it not for Cogar's profession. He's one of the world's top competitive lumberjacks, the best American in an unusual sport. Since 2009, Cogar, 30, has made his name in the Stihl Timbersports Series, a competition of sawing and chopping prowess that the tool company launched in 1985. If you've ever seen barrel-chested men on ESPN brandishing axes with the ferocity of Vikings, you've seen timbersports. With his victory at the 2017 U.S. championship, Cogar won over $10,000 and a Ram truck, and became the first American to win five consecutive national titles. "He's all business," says Dave Jewett, a fellow competitor. "Everybody eventually caves and makes a big mistake in competition. Not Matt."

To stay competitive, Cogar has had to master not only the art of holding an ax and pushing a saw to get the best cut, but also sharpening an ax blade—an hours-long process—and measuring its final angle using a special protractor. He needs to understand the characteristics of different woods like poplar, pine, and ash, and to know which blade angles are best for chopping through them. To come out on top five years running means being good at six events, which requires the ability, like that of any elite athlete, to remain calm under pressure.

TIMBERSPORTS DEMAND A COMPLEX BLEND OF ELEMENTAL dexterity and offer a beacon of authenticity in a superficial world. There's also an anachronistic element, this practicing of a skill set that's edging toward extinction. What guys like Cogar do in competition is almost like preserving an art form, an endangered way of being that grows more precarious every year. Maybe in the future, competitive lumberjacks will be that rare breed of athlete alongside competitive long-haul truckers eking out a living, after their jobs have been autopiloted away, by demonstrating their prowess at power-braking an 18-wheeler.

Cogar has a round, boyish face and speaks softly with an Appalachian twang. He's unassuming, yet he possesses skills and a mellow that most men will never realize. Ask him what he thinks about being the best American lumberjack, and he'll start reciting the names of timbersports studs who came before him: David Bolstad, Melvin Lentz, Jason Wynyard. "It's a title you don't give yourself. It's a title you earn from somebody else," says Cogar. Now, in his bid to be the world's best, Cogar has quit his part-time job at a local outdoors store to become a full-time competitive lumberjack. He hopes to make money for his family—his wife and their 16-month-old baby girl—and be the first American in over 10 years to win the world championship in Lillehammer, Norway, in November. Last year he came in second.

The sport typically provides a living on a par with a McDonald's worker, and Cogar earns money only if he wins competitions. That's a dicey proposition in a sport stacked with athletes who are competitive through their 50s. "I remember people saying, 'Aw, you can't make a living at it.' Not to say 'hold my beer,' but let's see if it's actually true," Cogar says. "It's actually a lot harder than I imagined."



BLADE ▶ LOOK FOR A BLADE MADE OF TEMPERED W2, A KIND OF TOOL STEEL THAT'S EASIER TO SHARPEN AND FILE.

STRENGTH

BORN AND RAISED IN DIANA, A TINY TOWN IN WEST VIRGINIA'S Webster County, Cogar grew up on a patch of Appalachia where for decades men have tried to pull themselves up by looking down. Either through the coal they mined or the trees they felled, the ground provided a living, including for Cogar's family. One uncle died in the coal mines; Cogar's father-in-law is still a miner. His grandfather worked in the woods, as did his great-uncles, John and Homer, strong men who hewed railroad ties. His father, Paul, went into the woods at age 17 and is still a professional lumberjack, an independent contractor who fells and sells his own lumber. He'll quote you 40 cents a foot for tulip poplar, a species that grows primarily in the Appalachian region.

Many of these Cogar family members competed in lumberjack sports, including the elder Cogar, a Dickies-wearing 60-year-old who tucks thick wads of tobacco into his bottom lip. Cogar grew up tagging along when his dad entered contests. Season by season, Cogar's father trained him methodically, gradually introducing him to the various lumberjack skills he would need in order to be successful. Paul still travels to and competes in the events his son enters. "Some of these younger guys, they try to tell me stuff," he says. "But I say, 'Guys, you can tell me this and that, but I've been doing this since before you were born.'"

The chopping competitions of today were borne of the turn-of-the-century logging industry. In America, informal competitions began in the 1870s. By the 1900s, lumberjack sports began catching on just as the logging industry teetered on the precipice of mechanization. "It was right around the time that lumberjacking stopped requiring certain skills," says historian Willa Hammitt Brown, who studies the cultural history of American lumberjacking. "So being skilled in something between practical and primal—a real, testable skill—was something people became increasingly interested in and excited about."

Around the turn of the 20th century, cultural stresses grew for both the paper shufflers of a growing managerial class and new assembly-line laborers who performed repetitive tasks instead of honing a craft. Hungering for something more real, Americans lionized lumberjacks as noble men by virtue of their trade. It didn't much matter that the idealized version of lumberjack lifestyle was just that—fiction. Lumberjacks lived dangerous, unenviable lives. They'd disappear for months to remote camps where they worked 10 hours a day, six days a week, felling trees with double-bladed axes and two-man crosscut saws. The tall tales of the timbermen were coping mechanisms, a way for weary loggers to turn the rigors of the woods into braggadocio. Chain saws replaced saws and axes. As machines proliferated, manpower dwindled.

Clockwise from top left: Cogar in the double buck; ax-throw thunk; fans at finals; Stirling Hart in the underhand chop; Dave Jewett feeling sharp; setup crew.

Still, the lumberjack, to many, represents manly respectability. City dwellers began to fetishize rural men's work as a type of authentic experience, a yearning that persists today and underlies the bespoke axes that are handpainted in a Brooklyn studio and makes "lumbersexual" style a hipster uniform from Los Angeles to New York City. "There is a longstanding belief in America that part of what defines a real man is the ability to create physical things," says Andrew Smiler, Ph.D., a thera-

SHARPEN ▶ USE A DIAMOND STONE TO SHARPEN THE BLADE; THEN RUN YOUR THUMB ACROSS IT. FEEL A BURR? FILE IT OFF. COAT THE BLADE GENEROUSLY WITH WD-40.

pist and coauthor of *The Masculine Self*. "The lumberjack is a throwback to this earlier definition of what it means to be a real man."

But is this yearning good for more than nostalgia? Clinging to an old archetype can be akin to throwing your arms around irrelevance. As the world changes, it's not easy for guys, especially physical guys, to do what they love and earn a living: What becomes of men who have to make money rather than earn it? That's why Cogar's father explicitly forbade his son from working for a timber company. "At one point in time I wanted to be a forester. My dad said, 'You're not going to go in the woods. I'll kick your ass if you do,'" says Cogar.

So Cogar took to lumberjack sports instead. What's missing is the regular paycheck. "It was not our goal to fund someone as a career," says Roger Phelps, Stihl's corporate communications manager. "It's not a sport with a huge purse." In a typical year, Cogar will travel to 15 competitions in the United States and another five or six abroad. A handful of wins across those competitions, combined with wins at the U.S. championship in the past five years, has allowed Cogar to do more than scrape by. Last year his gross income was about $60,000.

But paydays require being a top performer. The Greatest American Lumberjack has no sponsorships and no agent, which makes Cogar's future uncertain. In 2014, Cogar forced himself to make one more practice run with his crosscut saw after a grueling day of training. But his body wasn't positioned correctly. His right hand slipped off the handle and bashed into the back of the saw, cutting the tendon in the knuckle of his index finger. "That really devastated me. It wasn't a big cut, but it was just enough to really screw you," he says.

Surgery and physical therapy sidelined him for that year's world championship. The next year, Cogar began to question his ability, in part because of what he perceived as a weakness in his crosscut sawing. "Matt gets wrapped up inside his own head," says his wife, Emma, a clinical psychologist. "I think he was under pressure to come back and win the [Stihl] series. He got away from what he loves about the sport."

Cogar turned to self-therapy, reading the *Inner Game* books by tennis coach Tim Gallwey. Emma helped him parse the terminology as he developed his own set of grounding techniques. Before a chop, he'll pass the handle of his ax between his hands, concentrating on the grain of the wood. He'll set the blade against the log, visualizing the angle of his cut, homing in on the precise spot where he wants the blade to land. He's seeing the action before it takes place—counting the number of swings it will take to cleave a block, or the number of times he'll have to push and pull a saw to complete a slice.

Cogar's daily training consists of practicing one of the six chopping and sawing competitive disciplines. He might spend an hour on the "hot saw," a tricked-out chain saw used to make three slim cuts, called cookies, off a log. Cogar's is a 330 CC, 60-pound beast, powered by a Honda motorcycle cylinder, that cost him $8,000. He'll lift a log, set it on a stand, pick up his saw, place it on the wood, and sense his body positioning. Then he'll let it rip. Most of it is exercising his muscle memory so he can move quickly at competition time. In winter, his training involves hikes with a loaded pack and heavy lifting in the gym.

"One of things I like most about woodchopping is how old of a technique it is," Cogar says. "A lot of it came from guys in the timber industry felling trees with axes and saws, and here we are racing them today." Anachronistic though it may be, there is some deep gratification in manual labor, the blue-collar-type work where the action is as important as the outcome. Sharpening an ax blade to competition specs, for instance, can take Cogar three hours.

There's intrinsic reward in manual skill, says Matthew Crawford, Ph.D., a senior fellow at the University of Virginia. "The satisfactions of manifesting oneself concretely in the world through manual competence have been known to make a man quiet and easy," he writes in his book *Shop Class as Soulcraft*. "They seem to relieve him of the felt need to offer chattering interpretations of

GET LUMBERJACKED!

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▶ CHOOSE YOUR TOOL

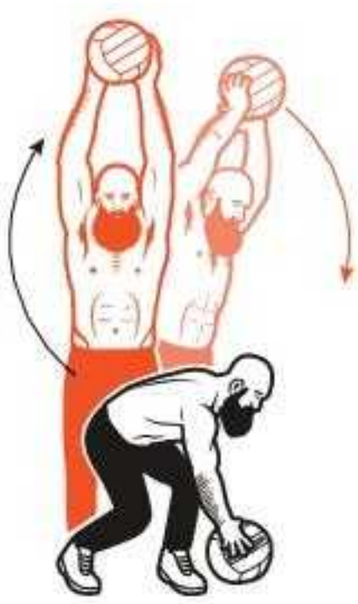
POWER
10-30 lb: quicker, explosive moves

STRENGTH
40-80 lb: slower, controlled moves

REPS: 5 TO 8 **SETS:** 3 **REST:** LESS THAN 90 SECONDS

❑ HEAD SLAM

Stand in front of a medicine ball (or use a slam ball or sandbag). Pick it up and raise it directly overhead. Pause; then slam it into the floor. Repeat.



❑ SIDE SLAM

Lift the ball from your left foot to your chest, then overhead. Rotate to the left and slam the ball to the outside of your left foot. That's 1 rep. Do all your reps and repeat on the right side.

SPLIT ▶ USE A MAUL (WIDE-HEAD AX). GRIP THE BASE OF THE HANDLE WITH YOUR NONDOMINANT HAND AND SLIDE THE OTHER UP THE SHAFT. AIM FOR A CRACK.

himself to vindicate his worth." Cutting wood is intensely satisfying even if you aren't proficient at it. That's one element of the lumberjack archetype that's worth holding on to. Whether as a hobby or a job, cultivating a craft—something tactile—provides agency, competence, and purpose. To paraphrase Crawford, it's about feeling like a man, not a cog in a machine.

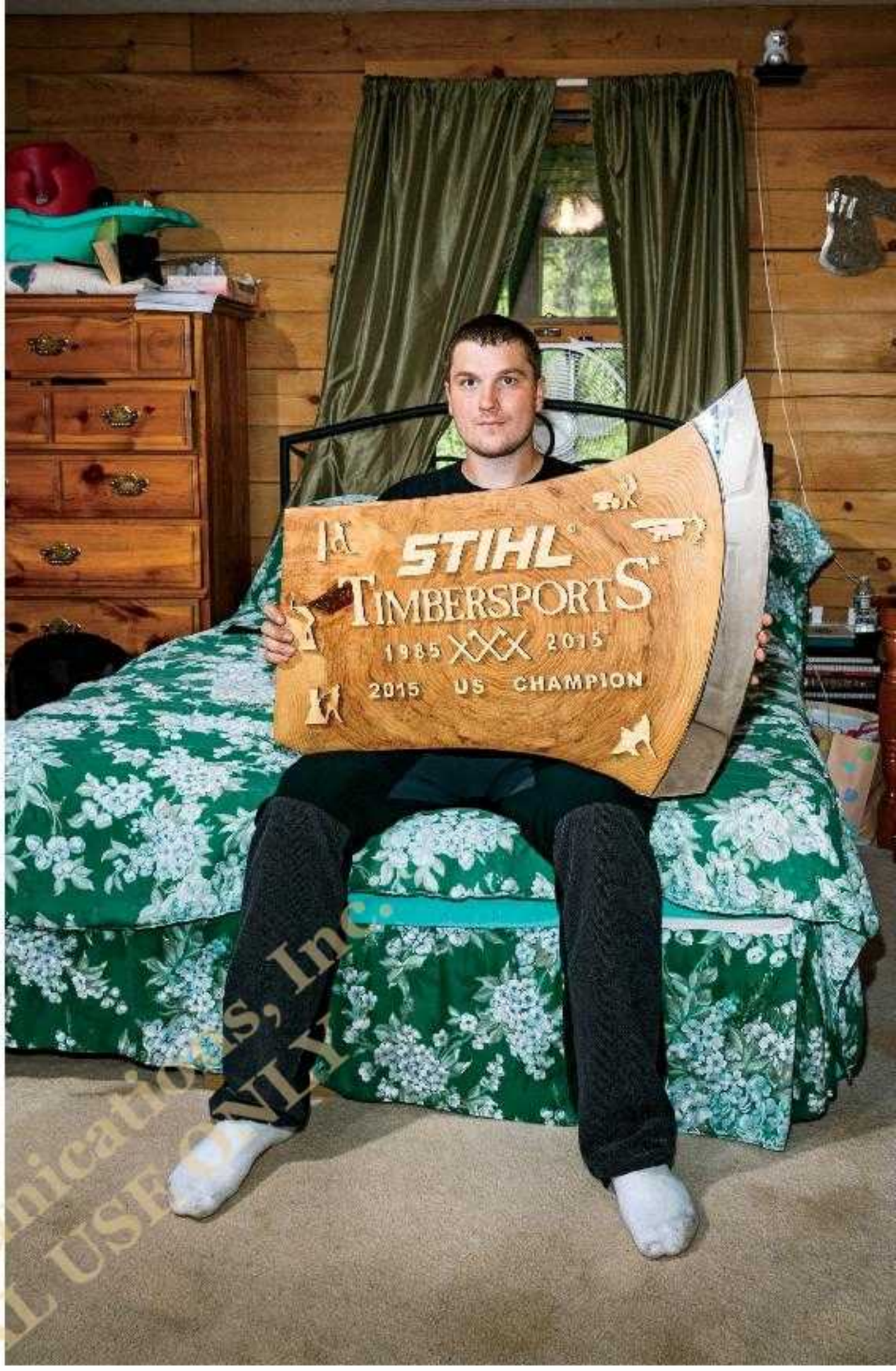
New science reveals that these kinds of activities are good for your mind, body, and soul. According to British research, knitting, of all things, may contribute to feelings of happiness. Whatever your tool of choice, whether it's a needle, ax, or brush, crafting appears to confer long-term health benefits. Research over the years supports the idea that engaging in such "purposeful" activities can reduce the effects of stress-related diseases and can slow cognitive decline. Russian trainer Pavel Tsatsouline extends the idea: Strength is the skill and your body the tool. His philosophy is to approach exercise as a practice—not a workout—on a journey toward lifelong fitness.

"In modern life, we have more convenience, but we're devoid of process," says psychiatrist Carrie Barron, M.D., coauthor (with her husband, Alton Barron, M.D., a Manhattan orthopedist) of *The Creativity Cure*. "The process of building something from beginning to end is satisfying. It can be baking bread, working on a home project, nurturing a garden, learning to play a musical instrument." When you're using your hands, you become absorbed in a task. Your brain can enter "flow," a pleasurable state that arises from deep absorption, which sets off a neurological cascade similar to what happens in meditation. Alton Barron learned carpentry from his dad and is a top hand surgeon. To ground himself and sweat off stress, he splits wood.

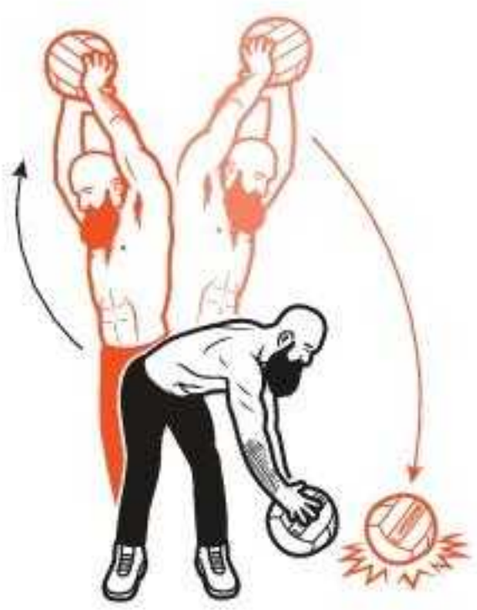
While Cogar needs to win to make money, what keeps him competing is a desire to improve. "It's pursuit of perfection, but it's also pursuit of perfecting yourself," he says. There's value in doing something well for its own sake, minus chest-thumping. The results are right in front of his eyes. "I put in all this work in the backyard, and then you go to that competition and open up that log and you end up cutting a [personal record]. It's like, 'all right,'" he says. For several years Cogar has traveled to Australia each spring to compete. The wood they use, eucalyptus ash, is twice as dense as most American varieties. It's how Australians and New Zealanders have come to dominate the global woodchopping scene. He refuses to forfeit that advantage.

"It's too late now to turn back," he says of commitment to compete. With that, Cogar retrieves another pine log, strapping it onto a metal stand he uses to practice sawing. He carries his hot saw out of the shed and places it in front of the log. With his hands on top of the pine, he waits as his father counts him down, clanking the back of an ax head on a piece of metal to begin.

Cranking hard on his pull start, the hot saw comes to life buzzing wildly, the sting of racing fuel in the air. Freckled biceps pulling against a black T-shirt, Cogar rips through the log three times. In seven seconds, it's over. ■



The prize money isn't big, but the trophy is: Cogar with proof that he's America's best lumberjack.



❑ 360 SLAM

Starting on the left, raise the ball in an arc across your body, behind both shoulders. Slam it on the left, pivoting your feet throughout. That's 1 rep. Do all reps, repeat on the right side.

Source: Mike Nelson, Ph.D., exercise physiologist

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **T.M. DETWILER**