



Extreme Fitness

**TIPPING POINT**  
Dancer Glenn  
Allen Sims tests  
Cuomo's balance

## Built by Ballet

Christopher Cuomo, ABC News 20/20 anchor and extreme-fitness investigator for *Men's Health*, goes toe-to-toe with Alvin Ailey's dancers to learn how they develop world-class jumping power, insanely strong cores, and outrageous flexibility

BY CHRISTOPHER CUOMO • PHOTOGRAPHS BY RACHEL PAPO

# I

### IMAGINE DOING THIS WORKOUT BAREFOOT:

Descend into a squat, grab a 130-pound weight, explode upward as you raise it overhead, scamper on your tiptoes for 10 yards, and then slowly lower the weight to a count of eight. Repeat 15 times in 5 minutes. Between lifts, do split jumps and pushups. Sound diabolical, like a page from a Navy SEAL training manual? That's ballet. Modern dancers do this for hours a day every day.

"Dancing demands phenomenal power, extreme flexibility and balance, and high-end aerobic fitness," says Lyle J. Micheli, M.D., a clinical professor of orthopedic surgery at Harvard medical school. It's CrossFit in tights, with ballerinas for barbells.

Take, for example, Glenn Allen Sims, a 36-year-old star of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York City. He's 5'10" and 180 pounds of muscle. But even more impressive, he has gone 15 years without a major injury. He's also an instructor in Horton Technique, named after Lester Horton, an innovative choreographer who turned fitness into art and art into fitness.

Horton developed a series of body-weight exercises that stress balance, endurance, isometric strength, and explosive power. It also emphasizes flexibility and dynamic stretching: "Length is strength," Sims says. Put another way, you're only as strong as your weakest link, and Sims uses Horton's drills to fortify those links.

Sims invited me and four dancers from Ailey's second company to a 2-hour Horton training session. Some of the moves were way beyond my ability, but the ones described on the next page are worth mastering... if you have the balls to train like a dancer.



**DANCE CLASSES**  
See these drills at [MensHealth.com/ailey](http://MensHealth.com/ailey), and visit [atvinalley.org](http://atvinalley.org) for tour dates.

### Strengthen your stabilizers

When men train their legs, they typically focus on specific muscles, like the quads and calf muscles, using basic up-down movements. But most sports use lateral movements, which are both powered and controlled by muscles we rarely think about or bother to train: those on the inner thighs and outer hips.

Those lateral movements—especially when they involve sudden changes of speed or direction—can lead to ACL injuries, which are relatively rare among dancers, despite their leaps and pivots. So start with ground-based exercises to strengthen those muscles. It'll be harder than any stretching you've ever done.

#### THE DRILL

**1** Lie on your back with your arms by your sides. Brace your core and raise one leg 2 inches. Keeping it straight, slowly sweep it out as far as you can to the side. Hold for 8 seconds, slowly return to the starting position, and switch legs. That's 1 rep. Do 8, varying your leg height with each rep.

**2** Lie on your side. Sweep your top leg forward as far as you can, hold for 8 seconds, and then go as far backward as you can and hold for 8 seconds. Switch sides and repeat. That's 1 rep. Do 8, raising the leg to a different height each time.

### Soup up your squat

I feel like I've stumbled into the wrong cartoon—G.I. Joe trying to hang with Gumby. Now we're on our feet for what Sims calls primitive squats. With arms out in front and feet shoulder-width apart, we push our hips back and sink into the deepest squat possible, then rise to the starting position while Sims counts to eight. The slow pace and extended range of motion make this much more challenging than I'd expected.

#### THE DRILL

Do 10 reps of each of these three squats, with no rest in between. Squat to an eight count (4 seconds down, 4 seconds up).

- 1** Feet shoulder-width apart
- 2** Feet together
- 3** Feet beyond shoulder width, toes pointing out

No problem? Shift onto your tiptoes and repeat the circuit.

### Challenge your core

Next we do an ab-slaughtering exercise called the coccyx balance. You start on your back with your knees bent and feet on the floor, then raise your torso and feet simultaneously, with your arms straight out in front of you, slightly lower than your legs.

It's all I can do to hold this position, but for Sims it's child's play. He opts for a variation in which he extends his legs, one at a time, to a count of eight. Then he brings his knees to his chest one at a time at that same merciless 8-second pace. Finally he spreads his legs into a split. He does all this while balanced on his tailbone—for 2 minutes! A bead of sweat on his brow is the only indication he's human.

#### THE DRILL

Hold the coccyx balance for 15 seconds. Rest 15 seconds; repeat twice. Work up to holds of 30 seconds per set.

### Dial in your balance

My abs are still on fire when Sims starts a single-leg balance series. First is the table: Stand on your right leg, toes forward. Extend your left leg to your side, bend your knee 90 degrees, and rotate your left thigh behind you. Your entire leg should be at hip height and parallel to the floor. Hold your arms out to the sides for balance.

My glutes are on fire, but we're just getting started. Next is the front T: Bend forward while straightening your left leg behind you and extending your arms in front of you. Gaze down and continue until your arms, torso, and left leg are parallel to the floor. Return to the table position and switch legs.

#### THE DRILL

Do 2 sets of 10 reps per leg, going from the table to the front T and back. Rest for 30 seconds between sets.

When you can do that well, try this: Instead of moving from the table into the front T, move into the forward table. Rotate your right foot to the side and bring your left leg forward, like the start of a roundhouse kick. Hold your left leg at hip level in front of you and parallel to the floor, and bend your left knee 45 degrees. Your left arm is straight out to the side, right arm pointing forward. Do 2 sets of 10 repetitions with each leg.

### Enhance your hops

"Leaps come in multiples on stage," says Sims, "so we train to jump many times and end big." Sims sets off across the studio, counting out a series of small jumps, his cohorts in tow. Just as I'm thinking, *Hey, they don't jump that high*, Sims explodes 4 feet into the air, scissoring his legs into a split.

#### THE DRILL

You need a 15-yard runway. Skip three steps and then jump as high you can, splitting and straightening your legs in midair. As you land, skip twice more to slow down. Do 5 reps, launching off the same leg, and then do 5 more, taking off from the opposite leg.

**BEFORE I BAILED**, I asked Sims to show me how he lifts the ballerinas so gracefully. "Power and technique," he explained as he positioned my hands in the slot under the outer edge of a dancer's shoulder blade. On a count of three I did a half squat, she took a little hop, and I popped up like I was doing a push press. I felt pretty good about myself, but only for that brief moment before my arms and legs started to quiver.

Sims gave me a sympathetic grin. The lift requires strength and stamina. Making it look effortless is an art. ■

## LEAN MACHINE

*When you're on stage wearing nothing but a pair of tights, you can't afford to have bloating or any bodyfat. Here's how dancer Glenn Allen Sims eats to stay strong and lean.*



**BREAKFAST**  
Oatmeal with goji berries; espresso; and two glasses of water. He minimizes carbs later to avoid bloating.



**SNACK**  
To stay energized Sims drinks "green power" juice: kale, apples, collard greens, celery, ginger, and cucumber.



**LUNCH**  
Green salad with a lean protein, like a 6-ounce grass-fed steak; a side of quinoa; and a carton of coconut water.



**DINNER**  
After the performance: crackers, cheese, fig jam, and a glass of red wine. His indulgence: Kettle potato chips.