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MASTER CLASS

## Be Nimble, Be Quick . . .

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It is something that I have slowly had to come to terms with: I am no longer, by almost any athletic definition, a young man. It's a reality that becomes more apparent with each year after 30 (I'm now 34) and was never clearer than when I decided to take up soccer again after more than a decade away from the pitch. My decline was immediately obvious. I had lost ball skills and instincts, was noticeably slow to react and always felt a step or three — or five — behind where I wanted to be. I tried to tell myself that I was just rusty. Then I played against a team of twentysomethings, and it felt as if I were dribbling in moon boots.



Joachim Ladefoged/VII

**NEXT UP, CHEST BALLS!** One of many unending but useful workouts at Chelsea Piers

This sting of inadequacy isn't specific to soccer players, of course. My friends who play basketball or hockey or softball feel the same way. A decline in performance is a part of aging that all athletes have to accept, but it's especially frustrating for we mediocre dabblers who don't have the time, money or access to train like pros.

That's what led me to Bluestreak, a fitness center recently added to the athletic amusement park that is New York City's Chelsea Piers sports complex. Bluestreak is founded on the philosophies of John Frappier, a North Dakota-based [exercise](#) physiologist who began his career helping top-tier athletes improve their speed and agility. His program, called Athletic Republic, now caters to professional athletes as well as weekend warriors who are trying to get back into sports. A similar company, Parisi Speed School, is also spreading its fast-twitch gospel across the country.

In the mid-1980s, Frappier traveled to the Soviet Union to study just how it was that a country so bad at producing loaves of bread for its populace could be so good at cranking out elite athletes. While there, he observed something curious: a car moving at a decent clip down the street with a man running behind it, clinging to a bar welded to the bumper. It was Frappier's epiphany. Towing, he realized, forces runners to move at a speed they can't maintain under their own power. It retrains the leg muscles to make longer, more frequent strides. And that makes a runner faster. "I knew I couldn't come back to America and tell parents, 'Hey, I can make your son faster by hanging on the back of my Suburban!'" Frappier says. "Then it dawned on me that we could do this with a treadmill."

But not just any treadmill: the SuperTreadmill, a \$25,000 machine capable of speeds up to 28 miles per hour and inclines up to 40 percent. Bluestreak has two such mills, plus a variant model that allows hockey players to get the same effects while on skates, as well as numerous patented devices and gizmos designed for specific sports.

From the perspective of the miserable clod on the treadmill, the sessions seem highly erratic, almost irrational in their unpredictability. You might run for 15 seconds, take a quick break, then sprint at a severe incline for 8 seconds. Next, you might sprint for 8 seconds, run while holding on to the bar for 10, then sprint for another 8. A few sessions into the program, I was given an extra treat: SprintCords, another of Frappier's patented thingamajigs, which strap to the thighs and calves like monster rubber bands. I was to hold on to the treadmill's bar and run at a full sprint while my trainer, John Feugill, a former professional football player, pulled against the cords. "You'll really have to drive your knees," he said. This was exceptionally unpleasant, but I could sense right away how it changed my stride. I had no choice but to thrust my thighs and knees high and to push off harder from the balls of my feet. It was a vague approximation of the form exhibited by top sprinters.

Feugill also worked on my counterproductive arm motion. For years, I've tended to tense up in my shoulders and clench my hands into fists when running. The correct form is to run with palms open and arms bent at 90 degrees. You know you're swinging the arms enough if your fingers, as Feugill says, go from "chin to back pocket." Many people angle their hands and forearms inward, causing the torso to twist and impeding a seamless forward motion.

In order to make you acutely aware of your mistakes, there's a big mirror in front of the treadmills, and every session is taped and played back immediately on a machine called the Dartfish. "Look how much better you look," Feugill said, pointing at a replay on the flat screen above us. "Your arms are at your sides. But I'd still like to see those knees a little higher." He graciously made no comment about my contorted, purple face.

## DRILLS AND MORE DRILLS

During the three months I trained at Bluestreak, I worked out alongside college athletes, out-of-shape financial types, decently fit office drones like myself and a seemingly endless stream of high school kids with generous parents. A 12-year-old hockey player barely reached my waist. I worried that he might be sucked into the barrels of the hockey treadmill.

It was humbling enough to share weight stacks with kids half my age, but even worse was taking part in soccer drills alongside them. Abuto King Nyanjong, one of the primary soccer instructors, took to calling me "Senior" because I was so often in the company of teenagers. A former member of the Kenyan national soccer team, Nyanjong once held the Guinness Book world record for juggling, having bounced a ball off his various body parts 98,800 times over the course of 16 hours and 27 minutes.

How did you do this? I asked him. "Focus," he answered. "Focus" is what he often said when we were all gasping at the end of a drill that was supposed to have ended a minute earlier.

The objective of the soccer-skills training is to refine your "touch," to learn to control the ball in almost any situation. As with the treadmill, it was often unclear if Nyanjong was working from a set method or making things up as he went along. He would scatter cones and put us through a drill in which we retrieved bouncing balls, and then, in quick succession, he'd hit balls off our heads and chests. His point being: Soccer is

unpredictable; anything can happen. After a drill ended, Nyanjong would raise a hand for a round of high fives. “Could be better,” he would say, showing off a big, toothy smile. “Water break.”

## 18 M.P.H. ON A TREADMILL

Like his Soviet counterparts, Frappier also developed a sadistic fondness for plyometrics, a training method that involves jumping in pre-set patterns among numbered boxes painted on the floor. Sometimes you jump over actual boxes; other times you leap onto platforms. Later in the program, you might jump while holding a medicine ball. It’s about as fun as it sounds.

But I was noticing results on the soccer field. I was making better touches during my evening games, feeling a step quicker and even reaching some balls I wouldn’t have bothered to chase before starting Bluestreak.

It was almost impossible to gauge my progress from week to week in terms of actual speed — it would take a freakishly attuned sense of self to know what a few tenths of a second feels like — but for the most part I found myself handling the more advanced treadmill workouts with less struggle. Which doesn’t mean they were easy. During the sprints at the end of the workouts, I was hitting 18 m.p.h. on the mill, far faster than I could run on solid, unmoving ground.

The hardest workouts occurred under the watch of Tina Prickett, Bluestreak’s head soccer coach, who played soccer and lacrosse at [Long Island University](#) and now plays professional football — yes, football — for a team called the New York Sharks.

“Ooh, yours is cruel,” she said after glancing at my workout schedule one day. “It seems easy, with all these holds. Then it gets brutal.”

The belt on the treadmill was moving at 12.5 miles per hour. Prickett punched in some numbers, adjusting the angle so it approximated that of the roof on an A-frame chalet. In six-second intervals, I was to run unaided, run while holding the bar, then run again unaided, with only the briefest moments of rest in between. If not for Prickett spotting my lower back with her hand, I would have sailed off the belt, and by the end of the workout, I was panting like a sled dog.

“Why do you think they call it 666?” she said, and laughed as I collapsed onto the floor, covering my face with a towel. .

## GETTING BACK IN THE GAME

There are countless speed-and-agility schools, but these two are the best established and the only ones with multiple locations across the country.

### ATHLETIC REPUBLIC

There are about 150 affiliates nationwide, including Chelsea Piers Bluestreak. Choose speed training only (favored by runners) or speed plus sport-specific skills in soccer, basketball, tennis, golf, football, volleyball, lacrosse, running, figure skating, gymnastics or hockey. The sport-specific programs at Bluestreak cost \$1,200 for 20 sessions. [chelseapiers.com/bluestreak](http://chelseapiers.com/bluestreak). For other locations, go to [athleticrepublic.com](http://athleticrepublic.com).

### PARISI SPEED SCHOOL

Former track all-American Bill Parisi started his program 15 years ago out of the back of a van in New Jersey. Now with more than 30 locations, the school tends to focus on young athletes and pros (the prep sessions for the N.F.L. combine are well known), but adult programs are offered. Clinics cover fitness, [nutrition](#) and team play, but the primary goal is to make you faster — fast. \$30 to \$35 per session.

### The Silent Scream Of Your Thighs

The following exercises can't replace what you get from a program like Bluestreak, but they're all easily done at home and can help build speed and agility by improving leg strength in the hip extensors and hip flexors. Do three sets of 15 to 20 reps two times per week.

**SQUATS** Put your hands behind your head and squat until your knees are bent at a 90-degree angle. Don't let your knees lean out past your toes, and keep your back straight. For more of a challenge, do the squats while holding a pair of dumbbells.

**SQUAT JUMPS** Squat to 90 degrees and then jump as high as you can. Repeat immediately upon landing.

**WALKING LUNGES** Take a big step forward — about twice the length of your natural stride — and then lower your back knee until it's approximately an inch above the floor. Push off the front leg and take another long step, and so on.

**SPLIT JUMPS** Start with one leg thrust forward, as in the walking lunge, with the rear knee almost on the floor. Jump as high as you can. Keeping your mind in a happy place, repeat the jump as soon as you land, alternating legs.

**FLOOR BRIDGE** Lie on your back with your feet flat on the floor and your knees at 90 degrees. Raise your hips and hold for two seconds; only your shoulders and the soles of your feet should be on the floor. Drop slowly into the starting position and repeat. J.D.