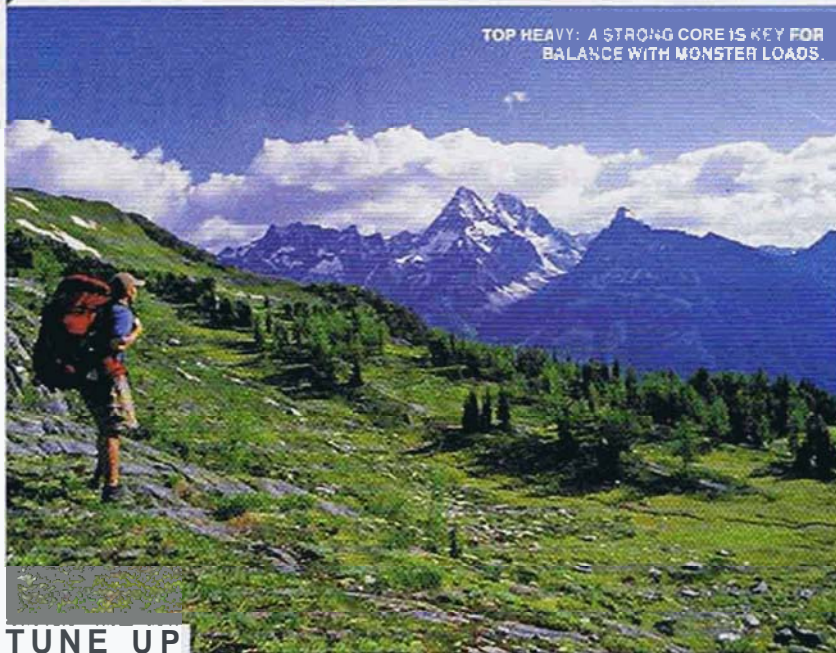




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TOP HEAVY: A STRONG CORE IS KEY FOR BALANCE WITH MONSTER LOADS.

TUNE UP

Heavy Mettle

3 targeted exercises to strengthen your big-pack muscles

Since bagging Mt. Adams as a 12-year-old Boy Scout, Erik Moen has logged many miles under heavy loads. So the Seattle-based physical therapist understands the unusual physical demands of big hiking trips better than most. And in more than 13 years on the job, he's seen many backpackers underestimate the strain on their legs and backs of carrying 30-plus-pound loads.

Hikers are notorious, he says, for focusing on quads and glutes—the big push-off muscles—but ignoring the hamstrings. “If you don’t have strong hamstrings, you can have an irregular rotation of the knee, which means the knee doesn’t track as well, leaving it weaker,” Moen says. Back strength is also critical, because your trunk stabilizes your body under a hefty pack. Here’s the 3-days-a-week regimen Moen recommends for developing a big-load-ready body.

SINGLE-LEG STEPDOWN

This exercise simulates backpacking by focusing on the quads and glutes—muscles that feel the stress when you’re walking downhill late in the day. With a barbell over your shoulders equal to the weight you plan to carry (or, for perfect simulation, wearing the loaded backpack itself), step up and down on a 4-inch stair or bench, always focusing on good posture (hips level and square and knees over feet) and keeping equal tension on each leg. When you can do 30 reps without obvious fatigue, add weight and gradually increase the height of the step, topping out at 12 inches.

SEATED LEG CURL

This machine provides an unbeatable exercise for hamstrings; it also works the glutes. With your feet under the pads at a slightly outward angle, lift the weight up until your feet come just short of hitting your glutes. Hold for a beat, then lower. Do two 15-rep sets with enough weight to feel fatigue, but not so much that form is compromised; build to three sets of 10.

GOOD MORNING

Moen recommends this exercise for a strong lower back. Start with a loaded backpack or unweighted barbell over your shoulders; you should be able to handle the weight for 10 to 12 reps. “Bend your hips forward until your upper torso is parallel to the floor, feeling that full stretch in your lower back,” Moen says. “Pause briefly, then return to the starting position.” Knees should be slightly bent, feet slightly wider than shoulders. Stand next to a mirror so you can concentrate on keeping your back mostly straight. When you’ve got the form down, add weight gradually and increase to three sets of 10.

PHOTOS BY JOHN E. MAMROTT (THIS PAGE), STEVEN G. SMITH