

04.

GO >
HEALTHY

By Stephanie Pearson
Photograph by
Jason Dewey

The Ultimate Pat on the Back

THE ASPEN BACK INSTITUTE'S
MASTER HEALER, CLINTON
PHILLIPS, HAS GOT YOUR
BACK—AND THEN SOME



BACK PAIN CAN KILL YOU. That's what Tim Semrau, a 55-year-old builder from Aspen, thought when his lower spine seized up so badly while he was heli-skiing last year that he was virtually paralyzed mid-run.

"I got home, went to a physical therapist, a chiropractor, and then a back surgeon," says Semrau. "The surgeon told me"—predictably—"that I'd need surgery and never do a sit-up again."

Nice as no sit-ups sounded, the hardcore athlete—who skis, and plays basketball year-round—had resigned himself to the knife when he was saved by a Greek chorus of buddies intoning, "Aspen Back Institute." Semrau promptly headed over to the nearby St. Regis Hotel.

With its heated outdoor pool, charming international staff, and 179 luxury rooms, the regal St. Regis, located just a couple blocks from the gondola, is as good as Aspen digs get. Around the corner from the leather chairs and crackling fire in the lobby, ABI is a spa-like space with peak views, futuristic-looking machines, and a staff headed up by a South African who has worked his magic on more than 1,500 battered backs—from Bode Miller's to Jimmy Buffett's.

"We can progress people all the way to the Olympics," says

Clinton Phillips, the 33-year-old expat who founded the institute six years ago. "It's just a matter of goals."

For those who've spent any time in lumbar hell, Phillips might sound like the sort of false prophet found on infomercials. After all, back pain is virtually epidemic in the U.S.: According to the American Pain Society, about one in four adults suffer from lower-back problems—with the majority of those reporting over 45 years old—and back pain is the fifth-most-common reason for doctor visits, totaling \$26 billion in direct health-care costs per year. Yet the pain persists.

"Most of the people we get in here are high-stress financial guys with Type A personalities," says Phillips. "They need the best possible therapy in the quickest possible time."

In 2001, after graduating as a doctor of chiropractics in Johannesburg, Phillips moved to Aspen to play rugby. Through odd jobs,

BRACE YOURSELF

The Aspen Back Institute offers a holistic solution to chronic back pain—the fifth-most-common reason for doctor visits in the U.S.

he met two influential Aspenites who had serious back troubles and were given frightening diagnoses, based on MRIs, from traditional docs. Using a unique hands-on approach—combining physical therapy, massage, and acupuncture—plus exercise psychology, Phillips was able to rehabilitate their backs within eight weeks. The men were so grateful that they asked him to stay, offering to help with Phillips's visa and living costs. This patronage, unheard of in physical therapy, saved Phillips thousands of dollars as he got his business off the ground. It was also a testament to his prowess. He immediately opened up shop and refined his technique, which stands on four pillars: strength, flexibility, alignment, and the mind-body connection.

"The main cause of back problems is weakness," says Phillips. "We get out of bed, into a car, at a desk, into another car, and then back into a bed again. People need to learn how to use their backs."

Strength and flexibility are crucial, says Phillips, as is aligning the spine to make sure that each segment is moving. But the real key is psychology: helping people understand what repetitive stress does to their bodies. "People get scared when they hear they have a degenerated disk," he says. "We empower them by explaining what's going on in their minds and bodies."

Phillips doesn't have any psychologists on his eight-person staff, but his clients' mental and emotional states play a major role in his diagnoses. This uncommon approach is a far cry from traditional chiropractic or surgical treatment, which rarely takes into account anything but structural abnormalities.

"The first thing we do is find out how much the mind is affecting this person," says Phillips. "It can be as much as 90 percent."

To that end, each client completes a 16-statement form, ranking items such as "I have a fear of developing back pain" and "I lack a social network" and "I have trouble sleeping." After Phillips studies the questionnaire, he'll ask for more information around disconcerting answers.

"Just the question 'How are you sleeping at night?' usually leads to a whole host of other issues," says the chiropractor. "People will say, 'I can't sleep because my boss is putting me under pres-



Back in Action

Follow Clinton Phillips's plan for a better back

IF A TRIP TO ASPEN this fall or winter isn't in the cards, order Phillips's *Heal the Back* beginner or advanced DVD (beginner, \$30; advanced, \$20; both, \$40; aspensback.com/dvd.html). In the beginner DVD, you'll find a series of ten daily stretches for your back, among other helpful advice. For seasoned athletes, some of these exercises may seem basic, but ABI devotees swear by them. Here are a few of the crucial moves:

> **TA (Transverse Abdominus) March** Lie on your back with your knees bent. Breathe out and in a few times. On your next breath out, draw your belly button toward your spine, slightly rock

your pelvis back, and march, while holding your pelvis perfectly steady. It's a very subtle exercise but a great key to lower-back happiness. Start out at five times per session.

> **Half Bridge** Lying on your back with your arms extended to the sides, bend your right knee and extend your left leg. Lift your hips and turn your trunk toward the extended left leg. Do 15 per side, then switch sides.

> **Figure 4 Stretch** Lying on your back, bend your knees and cross your right ankle over your left knee. Use your right hand to push down on your right knee. Hold for 30 seconds, then switch sides.

> **Figure 4 Bridge** Lying on your back with your right knee bent and arms at your sides, cross your left ankle over your right knee, then lift your hips off the floor and hold for 30 seconds. Switch sides.

> **Crunch** Lying on your back with your arms behind your head and your legs bent, lift your head and upper torso off the ground as high as you can, but don't come forward. Your angle should be toward the ceiling instead. Exhaling as you rise, imagine someone is pushing on your abdominals. Hold for a count of two. Do 15, holding the last one for a count of three. —S.P.

This approach is a far cry from traditional treatments, which rarely take into account anything but structural abnormalities.

back to the activities you love the most.

"Clint is a master at tuning in to a degenerative back and joints," says Semrau. For the builder's seized-up back, Phillips designed a three- to four-time-per-week program of stretching and strengthening that centers around the Vibra-Gym (Semrau loved it so much he bought his own) and Phillips's *Heal the Back* DVD, a series of ten to 15 easy-to-follow core back exercises.

"I've learned how to keep my back pain in remission," says Semrau. "If I go out and ski bumps for five hours, it's going to hurt some—I'm not 25. But at least I don't need surgery."

"We can't remove problems," Phillips adds. "But we can remove the response. Just because your back isn't perfect doesn't mean you can't be pain-free." ☺

sure' or 'I can't sleep because my kids are little bastards.' We don't try to be psychologists, but we try to help people understand they can have pain from emotional causes. I can't help you with your divorce, but I can get you stronger and prepared for stressful events."

After that, Phillips will look at your body's strength, flexibility, alignment, and trigger points, determining where muscles are under- or over-utilized. "We like to get our hands on people," without getting too touchy-feely, explains Phillips. "The biggest problem in the American medical system is that people don't touch. You may get an X-ray, an injection, an MRI, and some counseling, but nobody says, 'Let me feel.'"

Some clients stay a day; some stay six weeks. Either way, Phillips and his staff of three physical therapists, an orthopedic doctor, and three personal trainers, plus Pilates, Gyrotonics, yoga, and boxing instructors, will put clients on a few key machines after the mental assessment. One is the Vibra-Gym, a platform that vibrates while you stand on it—the novel idea being that the extra movement loosens you up and also disrupts your equilibrium so your core muscles work harder. Then you might graduate to the medieval-looking "flexion-distraction table" to open up your spine, an underwater treadmill to improve alignment, or the gym to work on strength. Ultimately, the goal is to get you