

CIRQUE DU STRONG

When you throw children in the air for a living, and catch grown men from great heights, strength and fitness is crucial. Then there's the question of sex appeal. *MF* heads to the circus to discover how the strongmen stay strong.

By William Verity Photography by David Tease

There was a time — after the crowds had gone home and the bleachers were empty — when Gene West would put on boxing gloves and face off against his older brother under the Big Top.

The brothers would get in the ring and spar to keep up their fitness for the acrobatic act where Gene springs off a teeterboard and lands on Glenn's shoulders. That was before Glenn broke his back.

These days, Gene has to do his workouts alone, but Glenn is still supporting his brother — except now he winces in pain when his sibling's 90 kilos come crashing down onto his shoulders from a great height.

"I used to be able to do bend-backs [leaning back until the hands touch the ground in an inverted U shape], but I certainly cannot do that anymore," Glenn says. "I am in constant pain, especially when I am doing the act.

I'm living on painkillers."

Glenn, 45, broke his back a couple of years ago when he was hanging by his teeth and spinning on a trapeze six metres above the ground. It was an act he'd practised for countless hours during a life that has been devoted to the circus with no major incident. Then the teeth piece that attached to the rope snapped.

"I came crashing down and my whole back was compressed in," Glenn says. "It's never really recovered and probably never will."

The accident put him out of action for more than a year, when he had to stop all his acrobat duties and just take on light duties, such as taking tickets at the door.

"When it happened, the doctors said I'd never do anything like that again, but I was determined to prove them wrong," he says. "I just gradually lifted heavier weights and stretched and stretched and stretched just to get my back to work at all."



These days, Glenn has difficulty touching his toes. Then there are the elbows that can't straighten properly – there's a bone sticking out of one of them – and the knees and ankles permanently injured by decades of tumbling on hard surfaces.

Glenn may be in constant pain, but for a man born into a circus family, the idea of giving up shows – or worse, the circus life altogether – is unimaginable. The Wests are made of tougher stuff. Their father, Victor, had a small circus, West Brother Circus, that toured shopping centres and schools and had a tent for a short while. After he died, while the boys and five siblings were still young, their mother, Jan, married Lindsay Lennon, the scion of Australia's most famous circus family. Lennon Brothers' Circus was founded in 1896 and lays claim to being the world's oldest travelling circus.

Jan and Lindsay founded Stardust Circus in 1993 and have been travelling the nation – with their 30 humans (including five children and a teacher), lions, monkeys, dogs, horses, ponies, pigs and goats – ever since.

Like his brother, Gene, 31, was born

into the circus and made his first performance when he could barely walk, living out of a caravan and training out of a portable gym in the back of a truck.

"I think fitness is addictive. You do it and you love doing it. I've always been that way," he says.

His fitness regimen fits into three categories: practising and then



"Can catch flying children" always impresses on a job resumé.



GENE'S CLASSIC WORKOUT

As well as a 3km run and three 3-minute rounds of boxing, Gene does a 20-minute morning and afternoon workout.

Morning

- Bench press: 4 sets of 10 reps each at 80%, including having bar level with shoulders, hands closer together and wide-grip variation
- Bicep curls: 4 sets of 10 reps with 25kg
- Dips: 4 sets of 15 using bodyweight between pedestals

Afternoon

- Leg raises: 4 sets of 30, both straight and bent legs
- Pull-ups: 4 sets of 15
- Feet-to-bar raises: 2 sets of 10



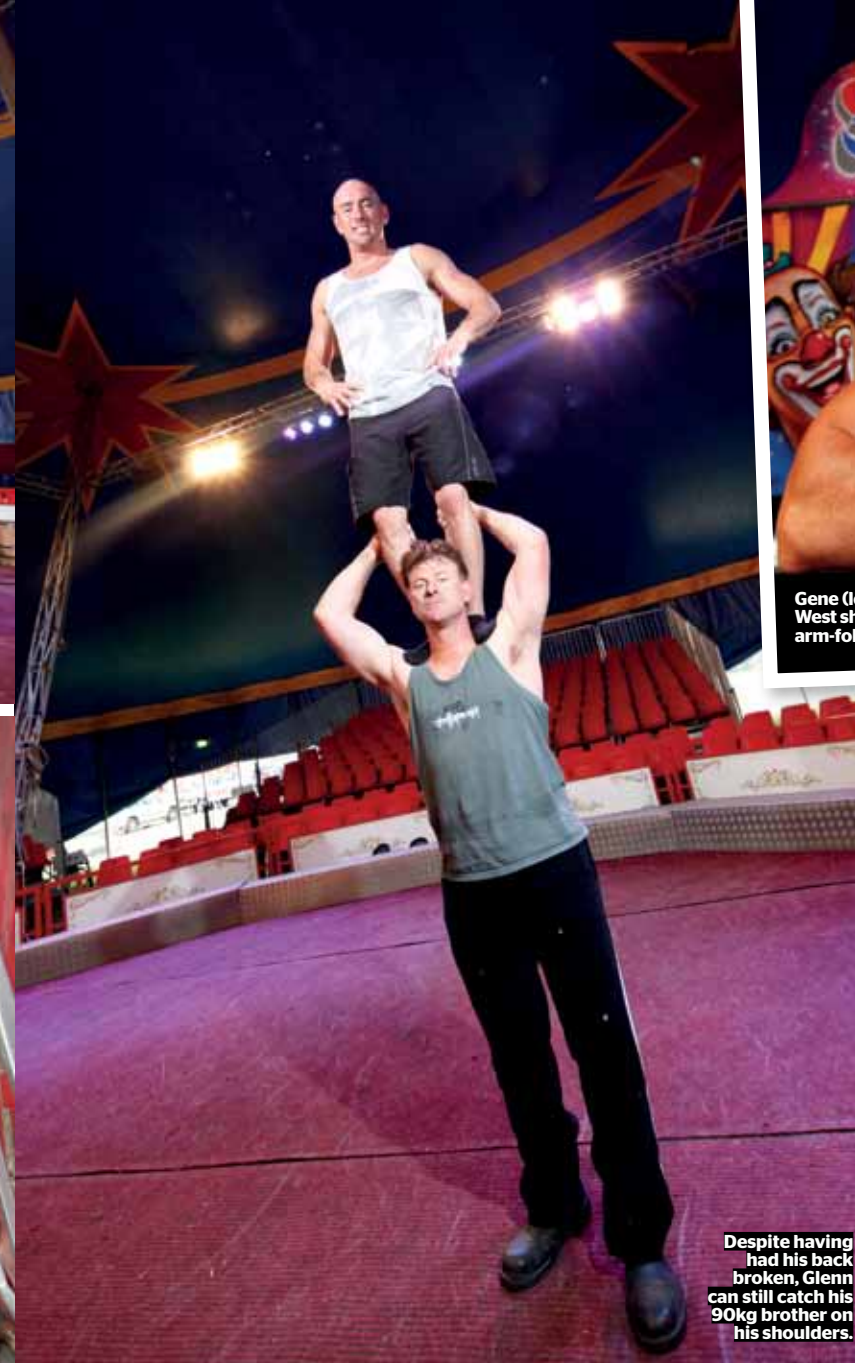
Gene doesn't lift heavy, as too much muscle mass hampers his agility.

"My workouts may only be 20 minutes long, but I wreck myself in that time."

performing shows for 11 months of the year all around Australia; packing and unpacking the Big Top (sometimes in the same day before moving on); and formal workouts.

"Outside the show, we're busy, lifting heavy things. It makes it a bit easier if you are physically fit, but I enjoy that anyway," he says.

Five days a week, for about two-and-a-half hours a day, he's throwing children – who weigh up to 52kg each – in the air, or catching them as they spring off



Despite having had his back broken, Glenn can still catch his 90kg brother on his shoulders.



Gene (left) and Glenn West show off their arm-folding techniques.

GENE'S TOP FITNESS TIPS

- "When you think that's enough for the day, go 10 percent harder. Go for at least another 20 minutes."
- "When you first start, ease your way in. You'll know the right time to start pushing it."
- "Drink lots and lots of water – four litres in a 90-minute workout."
- "Motivation is looking in the mirror and seeing real progress."
- "Make it a routine. Even if I've been going all day until 9pm, I'll still do a workout."
- Diet: porridge or Weet-bix for breakfast; protein shake mid-morning and mid-afternoon; sushi or stir-fry for lunch; dinner built around steak or chicken.

And there's another reason why bachelor Gene works out and invests lots of time into maintaining his washboard abs: sex appeal. "I concentrate on abs because that is what girls love more than any other muscle. It's really as simple as that," he says.

Although Gene loves the travelling life, and becomes bored if the circus stays in the same town for more than a couple of weeks, it's not so easy to meet girls who want to live out of a caravan.

"It's difficult to find the right girl," he says. "Either they're scared of the lifestyle or they find it too tough. Inside the tent you see the glamour and the glory of the circus, but outside, if it's muddy, or windy or raining, it can be tough. The other guys were just lucky, I guess, being in the right place at the right time."

Though Gene might still have another 20 years in him as a performer, he admits to enduring any number of niggling injuries. "If you have a sore shoulder or back, you just have to put up with it," he says. You don't have the luxury of taking days off, you've got to be tough. The show must go on. **mf**

the teeterboard. Once he's done, it's off to the gym.

"I don't like to lift a heavy weight because I want a fit muscle; I don't want to put on too much body mass," he says. "I want to be strong and fit, but I also need to be agile."

"I might do bench and then come back two hours later. I won't do it all in one hit. My workouts may only be 20 minutes, but I go full-on for that time and wreck myself. Then I'll come back a couple of hours later to do the next muscle group."

Even though the circus gym includes a treadmill, Gene prefers to sight-see at the same time, so he pounds the asphalt three times a week, concentrating on pace rather than distance. During school holidays, when Stardust Circus

might put on two shows a day, seven days a week, Gene has to conserve his energy and limit his formal workouts. However, that doesn't stop him performing sporadic sets of chin-ups when he passes a suitable bar, or 100 leg raises when he has a few minutes free.

"You get enough exercise doing the show, so I really don't need to go to the gym," Gene says. "I do it because I enjoy it. I just want to be a little stronger than I need to be. I need to do some gym because the kids are getting heavy. With kids or adults flying in the air, if my strength isn't there, accidents could happen. If they're landing on my shoulders or hands in a stand-up position, it's pretty heavy when the weight comes from the height."