



<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/health/bal-hs.fitness19aug19,1,4493412.story>

## Fitness Profile

# 'Taking a breather' is not in his vocabulary

By Tom Dunkel  
Sun Staff

August 19, 2005

Take one step up and to the right," Brian McVicker calls to Yvette Word, who looks like the proverbial kitten stuck up a tree. "Then put two hands on that handhold. Beautiful!"

Word, a 24-year-old computer engineer, is about halfway to the top of a 30-foot wall at Earth Treks Climbing Center in Timonium. McVicker is literally showing her the ropes of the sport.

He has more than a passing familiarity with the rush that comes from cheating gravity: Not only has McVicker, 35, been rock climbing since he was a teenager, he makes his living running Trapeze School New York's spinoff operation at the [Inner Harbor](#).

Five days a week he can be found swinging around a spider's web of cable-and-net rigging erected at Rash Field, coaxing novice flyers into taking leaps of faith into space.

On his days off, McVicker often hits the climbing wall at Earth Treks with a few friends. You'd think the guy must have an aversion to solid ground. To the contrary, like many of his jelly-kneed trapeze customers, he's scared of heights.

"My mind could easily run away from me," says McVicker. "It's all about trying to control the things you know you can control, like your breath and your posture."

It's also about enjoying a physical change of pace. McVicker's arms, shoulders and back get worked hard on the trapeze. The key to good climbing technique is to let your lower body carry the load.

"This gives me the cross-training for my legs and feet," he explains. "It also takes a lot of core strength to climb for an extended time. Flexibility's important here as well."

McVicker's least natural position may be a seated one. He grew up in Bellingham, Wash., a hotbed of recreational activity. Team sports weren't his thing. Instead, he immersed himself in skiing and rock climbing, plus martial arts and gymnastics.

After high school he test-drove a couple of conventional careers. The last one, mortgage banking, made him realize, "I needed an outdoors job."

He packed up and moved east to become the caretaker of a small estate in rural New Jersey. In 2002 he happened to vacation at a Club Med resort in the Caribbean that offered trapeze classes.

"It just consumed me," he says.

Within a few months he'd landed a job with Trapeze School New York and last year was put in charge of the Baltimore satellite school.

Trapeze people tend to be well-muscled, finely tuned physical specimens. But Jonathon Conant, founder and president of Trapeze School New York, says even by the lofty standards of his profession McVicker keeps himself in "tremendous" condition.

Conant recalls a time when the two of them had to set up safety lines, nets and jumping platforms for a festival at Coney Island. That's sweaty, tiresome labor. After a few hours Conant bonked. McVicker? He kept chugging along on his own and finished the rigging.

"He has years and years of knowledge of how to push himself," says Conant, "and to ignore whatever physical complaints he has to get the job done. There's a spirit in you, a will, and that guy's got it. Brian's pretty tough."

McVicker is 5-foot-5 and 155 pounds, with the prototypical gymnast's build. April through November, he is preoccupied with the trapeze school. Winters are spent as a ski instructor at Liberty Mountain Resort in southern Pennsylvania.

His weight never fluctuates more than 5 pounds. In part that's due to the fact he avoids fatty foods and drinks only the occasional glass of wine or Scotch.

And McVicker is a calorie-burning machine. He in-line skates and mountain bikes in his spare time. One day a week he takes a 4-mile run, cruising along at about a 9-minute-per-mile pace.

Whenever he goes to Earth Treks Climbing Center, McVicker not only wall climbs, he ends each session with a few sets of pull-ups done to fatigue, usually 15 to 20 repetitions.

Earth Treks also has a devilish piece of exercise equipment that resembles a small garage door hung at a 45-degree angle to the floor. Its surface is covered with seven, parallel pieces of thick plastic pipe that run horizontally, like stripes on a flag.

McVicker can scale that miniwall using only his hands, something that might give Spider-Man pause.

On workdays, he'll wake up about 7:30 a.m. and start his engine with a few minutes of pushups, sit-ups and yoga stretches. Whenever possible, he walks to Rash Field from his apartment on Saratoga Street.

His work is, of course, a workout in itself. Watch McVicker spend a half-hour hanging by his legs from a trapeze swing, serving as "catcher" for student after student as they do airborne tricks, and you'll understand why he doesn't belong to a health club.

"I don't have to go to the gym," McVicker says. "I do this. It's really difficult on your body."

Ski instructor and trapeze teacher Brian McVicker stays in top shape year-round. His life is an extended cross-training ritual that includes rock climbing, mountain biking, in-line skating, jogging, calisthenics and yoga.

"I try not to look at it as exercise," says McVicker, "but something fun."

Here are a few ways you can have "fun" too:

- McVicker grew up doing martial arts and gymnastics. He recommends those activities, even for adults: "Both teach you hand-eye coordination and full body awareness."
- You can get a good workout with just a simple pull-up bar. McVicker does pull-ups with palms facing forward and a narrow grip to work the upper body; palms facing inward ("military" pull-ups) works the biceps.

You can also do hanging crunches to work your abdominals. Do pike-position pull-ups (imagine sitting down with your legs fully extended in front of you) to simultaneously work the upper body and the abs.

- His favorite no-frills exercises are pushups, sit-ups, wall squats (squat with back flat against the wall, knees in a vertical line with the ankles, thighs parallel to the floor, and hold for 30 to 90 seconds) and walking.

*Copyright © 2005, [The Baltimore Sun](#) | [Get Sun home delivery](#)*