

Own the Room Like This Guy

Can a man learn to be funny in a day? To find out, we asked comedian Kevin Hart to give us a crash course in comedy. BY STEVEN LECKART



COMEDY WORKOUT

How do you improve a joke? With work, says Hart. "You need reps."

MY HEART IS RACING. MY PALMS ARE CLAMMY. My pits are probably stained. I can't check them right now because I'm standing on a stage, clutching a microphone, beneath a pink neon sign that reads "The Comedy Store."

Thankfully there's no crowd here to witness this. The club isn't even open. The only person watching me is Kevin Hart, a 34-year-old comedian who hosted *SNL* and sold out Madison Square Garden. The film from his 2011 stand-up tour, *Laugh at My Pain*, grossed \$8 million, and anticipation is high for *Let Me Explain*, this summer's follow-up.

Men's Health challenged Hart to make me funny, and he agreed. So tonight, after my lesson in comedy, I'll take the stage again—this time in front of an actual audience.

This harebrained exercise isn't just about stand-up, mind you. It's about finding the confidence and humor you need to navigate the real world. Personality is a versatile skill, useful at cocktail parties, business meetings, dates—anywhere you want to stand out.

"Funny men are superheroes," Hart says. "Women love guys who make them laugh."

And with that, class is in session.



Lesson 1: Move with Purpose

Hart directs me onto the stage. *Gulp.* I grab the microphone and launch into my routine. Before I've finished my first line, he stops me.

"That's stupid," he says, pointing to my right hand. I've been unconsciously twirling the microphone cable like a lasso. It's a nervous tick. I'm like your coworker who clicks his pen during his PowerPoint presentation, or the dude who peels labels from beer bottles.

This is a serious problem. Twenty-six percent of hiring managers say fidgeting is one of the biggest mistakes a job applicant can make, according to a recent survey by Adecco, a work-

force solutions company. And Hart gets it. As a teenage newcomer in Philadelphia, he would slam his mike stand down hard—30 times a set—for no reason. Then he learned to use his energy for good. "You always want to be active on stage, even if it's slow movements," he says.

UCLA researchers bear this out: They found that when someone gestures while talking, the observers show more auditory cortex activity. Movement helps a listener listen better.

So at your next presentation or client luncheon, do what great comedians do: Move. Gesticulate. Stay lively. It won't make you more clever, but at least you'll be easier to listen to.

IS THIS THING ON?

Writer Steven Leckart tests his fledgling jokes.

Lesson 2: Find Your Voice

Every office has that guy. He quotes *Zoolander* ad nauseam or does impersonations of Dwight from *The Office*. It's annoying.

"In the beginning, I was taking a piece of everybody's personality," Hart says. We're sitting now, talking through my upcoming routine. "I literally tried everything, even gimmicks. My catchphrase was 'But that's the way the cookie crumbles.'"

Eventually Hart figured out that it wasn't working, that mimicry leads to mediocrity.

"That's where a lot of comedians go wrong. They're not genuine," says Hart. "Go down the list of comedians who made it: Seinfeld, Pryor, Murphy." Their deliveries are unique.

Maybe one of your colleagues is great at long stories with triumphant punch lines. Unless that strategy comes naturally to you, don't do it. You won't fool them. Your humor should be specific to you. Perhaps that means witty observations, or something subtler, like facial expressions. Whatever is you, run with that.

Lesson 3: Accept Your Bombs

I'm back on stage. Hart's down in the front row, shouting at me like a heckler.

"You have to be cool missing the big laughs," he says. Everybody—even great comedians—tell bad jokes. But then they move on. They don't stop to explain their punch lines.

You've seen this: The awkward dinner-party moment where some guy finds himself lost in the weeds of his own long story. He doubles back, trying to fill holes, introduce new characters, add a bit more heroism.

"Just pull out," Hart says. "Your attitude has to be 'You boo me today, but you'll clap tomorrow.'" It's not cockiness, he says. It's about counting your losses and moving on.

So if your rambling story about the sleazy used-car salesman is stalling, deploy a segue. Just say, "Anyway, I'm glad I don't sell cars." Then change the subject entirely—to your job, the weather, the bean dip. The sooner you bail, the sooner people will forget.



So You Screwed Up. Now What?

In April, Kevin Hart was arrested for drunk driving. To his credit, he immediately owned up, tweeting, "This is a wake-up call for me. I have to be smarter." But comedian that he is, Hart's already making jokes about it. Is that okay? "There comes a time when people need to forgive themselves," says Juliana Breines, Ph.D., a postdoctoral fellow at Brandeis University. And when is that? "After you've shown remorse and made changes." So it's usually best to admit to the error of your ways (barring any legal consequences, that is). Reflect on the ramifications of your actions and plot your lifestyle changes. Once you've made those changes, let go of the guilt. After that? Sure, have a laugh.

FUNNY, NOT FAT
Hart's assistant,
Wayne Brown, lost
70-plus pounds.

Lesson 4: Take Care of Your Body

Hart used to be a Junior Olympian swimmer, and he still takes fitness seriously.

"I've always been very active," he says. "When you're on the road, if you don't have a workout schedule, you'll be just awful-looking. So I go to the gym, I shower, I hit the steam room, and then I go to work."

He occasionally posts videos of himself working out and cracking jokes with his buddies. They do cardio, circuit training, and core workouts with vertical leg crunches, ab wheels, and Bosu balance trainers.

That could be why Hart's wit is absurdly quick, even among comedians. Studies have linked exercise to increases in cognitive function and memory—essential "muscles" for humor. A recent University of Texas at Austin study even found that college students who hit the weights at the gym had higher GPAs.

I make a solemn vow to do some pushups before my comedy set tonight.

Lesson 5: Pay Your Dues

Pro tip: Don't debut your jokes at your annual company presentation. Start with lower stakes. I've chosen Marty's, a hole-in-the-wall club a few minutes from the Comedy Store. Hart's gone now, so I'm on my own.

The host calls me up for what should be a 5-minute set. It ends up being 17. I tell a story about getting hammered on Patrón and singing Spanish karaoke. Then I talk about the quarter-life crisis I experienced before turning 30, and about my one big "aha" after my son was born: "My penis makes penises!" (It got a laugh. Maybe you had to be there.)

And you know what? It felt okay to be on stage, telling my stories. I didn't own the room the way Hart does, but my set felt authentic. The few laughs I received were genuine. And as I walked offstage, the host—a heavyset stoner type—gave me a nod. "Good set, man."

I left Marty's feeling a little funnier. I might even go back sometime to see if I can improve. That's a big part of humor: the courage to constantly test material to see what works.

I remember something Hart said earlier: "When you look confident, they have no choice but to be with you." Maybe that's why people love a good stand-up: They trust he's not like the awkward jokester. Sure, he might drag you into the weeds, but he'll also show you out. The punch line is the escape. If it falls flat, oh well. He'll just laugh at himself instead. ■



THE \$15,000 WEIGHT-LOSS PLAN

Meet Wayne Brown. He's Kevin Hart's right-hand man, shown above doing situps. In 1998, Brown was a 255-pound tight end at Temple University; by August 2012, he was up to 325. So Hart made Brown an insane bet: Lose 40 pounds in 5 months, win \$10,000. Lose 50, earn \$15,000. Brown took the challenge and ended up losing 60 pounds. And since then, he's lost even more. He's now more than 70 pounds lighter than he was a year ago. Okay, so you don't have a rich friend offering you cash for fat, but you can still learn from Brown's methods. —S.L.



PERSONALIZE YOUR ROUTINE

With all the traveling, a reliable fitness routine was impossible. So Brown used whatever he could grab in his hotel gym. A typical scenario: He'd find a stationary bike, an elliptical machine, and a treadmill and spend 20 minutes on each. When he's not on the road, he mixes cycling, hiking, Pilates, and *Insanity: The Asylum*.



ENLIST THE HELP OF FRIENDS

If your buds see your effort, they'll offer support or rib you; either scenario is good. When Hart's money was on the line, he would leave chips outside Brown's hotel room, knock on the door, and run. Brown didn't take the bait. "If it's in my face, I can just say, 'Hey, I don't want it,'" he says. In short: Turning down the chips was empowering. And so was proving his buddy wrong.



COUNT YOUR CALORIES

You can burn calories all day, but if you're just taking them back in at mealtime, you'll never lose weight. "The first thing I did was stop eating the obvious bad stuff, like alcohol and fried food," says Brown. Then he gave himself a strict 1,600-calorie daily limit and tracked his intake using the MyFitnessPal smartphone app.