Episode Book

EPISODE #5587

10 Jobs That Break the Human Body, Ranked

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SYNOPSIS

What does it actually cost a human body to do the world's hardest work? This episode ranks the ten most physically gruelling jobs on Earth by the only honest metrics: total daily energy expenditure and sustained intensity as a percentage of maximal aerobic capacity. From commercial roofers cooking on hot membranes to wildland firefighters burning 6,000 calories a shift, the ranking separates jobs that let the body reset from jobs where the load never comes off. Along the way: why fear is metabolically expensive, how carrying 66% of your body mass changes the physics of walking, and where the exercise physiology literature simply goes silent.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

A desk worker sits at about two METs. A wildland firefighter on a bad day runs six thousand calories. That's the whole episode in one sentence, and we're going to spend the next twenty-five minutes trying to earn it.



Herman

That's a three-to-one ratio against a normal adult's daily intake, for the record. Not against a desk worker's. Against a human being.



Corn

Daniel's got a whole thing this week. He wants ten of the most physically gruelling jobs on Earth, ranked by increasing physicality. His test is the first hour — what would an office worker feel at minute sixty. He wants unusual exertion, stamina, strength, and he's explicit that it doesn't matter whether the job is famous or obscure, specific or general. Which is the interesting part, because it means crab fishing doesn't get a free pass just for having a television show.



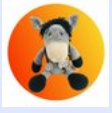
Herman

And it means we have to actually define gruelling instead of gesturing at it.



Corn

So we're ranking by the only honest metric. How much energy the body actually burns, and how close to its ceiling it runs while doing it. There's a lot to unpack here.



Herman

The yardstick is total daily energy expenditure, and sustained intensity as a percentage of maximal aerobic capacity. A desk worker sits at one and a half to two and a half METs. One MET is roughly the energy cost of sitting still. These jobs run at six to twelve plus METs, for twelve to fourteen hour shifts.



Corn

So the desk worker is not just doing less. He's doing less by a factor of five, and he's doing it for a third as long.



Herman

Right. And the second number matters more than people expect. Percentage of VO2 max is how hard you're running relative to your own ceiling. You can be at six METs and be fine, or at six METs and dying, depending on your fitness and the environment. Most of these jobs sit at sixty to eighty percent of max for hours. That's the zone where you can't clear lactate as fast as you make it.



Corn

Which is why the first-hour test is such a good framing. At minute sixty, an office worker isn't tired. He's already in debt.



Herman

We're going to tier these. Tier one is heavy but rhythmic — roofer, concrete laborer, commercial fisherman. The body gets micro-breaks between exertions. Tier two is sustained whole-body — logger, ironworker, wildland firefighter. No recovery, all day. Tier three is near the human limit — sherpa, saturation diver, foundry worker, special operations infantry. The environment itself becomes an antagonist.



Corn

And I want to flag the evidence gap up front, because it's going to come up three times. The hard quantitative work exists for wildland firefighters, military load carriage, logging, and heat-stressed industrial work. Commercial fishing, sherpa portering, and deep-sea diving rest on industry injury data and general physiology. Nobody's put a metabolic chamber on a deckhand.



Herman

Which doesn't mean they're not gruelling. It means our confidence is different, and we should say so.



Corn

Let's start at the bottom of the ranking. Heavy but rhythmic. Where the body at least gets a breath between sentences.



Herman

Commercial roofer. Forty to fifty kilogram bundles of shingles, carried up a ladder. Not once. All day. And the carrying is the easy part — the work itself is kneeling and bending on a surface that in summer is hot enough to soften.



Corn

Minute sixty for an office worker. What's failing?



Herman

Grip first, then lower back. You're holding a bundle against a ladder rung with one hand while you climb. That's a sustained isometric grip load, and most people's forearms are done in ten minutes. Then the kneeling. Six hours on your knees on a hot membrane, and your knees are not designed to be a load-bearing surface against something at sixty degrees Celsius.



Corn

And there's a radiant heat component that people underestimate. Black membrane in direct sun isn't just warm. It's a radiator underneath you.



Herman

Which is why the roofer ranks above what the raw weight would suggest. It's not just load. It's load plus heat plus height plus a surface that's actively cooking you from below.



Corn

And there's a skill dimension, right? It's not just brute carrying. You're laying courses, cutting, sealing, working around vents and edges.



Herman

And that's part of why it's so fatiguing — you can't zone out. A laborer hauling bags can let his mind wander. A roofer on a hot membrane near an edge is making decisions the whole time. The cognitive load rides on top of the physical load.



Corn

Job two. Concrete and masonry laborer. Forty kilogram bags, repeatedly. Mixing, hauling, bending.



Herman

High musculoskeletal load, absolutely. But here's the distinction — it's intermittent. You carry a bag, you set it down, you mix, you pour. There are micro-breaks built into the task whether you want them or not. Your heart rate spikes and comes back down.



Corn

So it's heavy but it's punctuated.



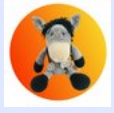
Herman

And that's exactly why it ranks below the jobs that never let you stop. The total work might be comparable. The recovery profile isn't. A laborer's heart rate might average a hundred and ten over a shift. A logger's might average a hundred and forty, because there's no task that lets it drop.



Corn

Is there a version of this where the laborer is actually worse off? Like if the bags are heavier than the task design assumes?



Herman

Sure. If you're on a crew that's understaffed, the micro-breaks disappear, and now you're in tier two territory without the tier two label. The tier isn't a property of the job. It's a property of how the job is actually performed on a given site.



Corn

Job three. Commercial fisherman. Deckhand.



Herman

Hauling nets and pots in freezing spray. Eighteen-hour shifts. And the thing that doesn't get said enough — you're doing all of it on a moving deck. Every lift is also a balance correction. Your stabilizers never turn off.



Corn

And this is our first evidence gap.



Herman

It is. The injury data is grim, and the crab fishing reputation is earned. But I could not pull a controlled energy-expenditure study on deckhands. The peer-reviewed exercise physiology literature basically skips this job. So we're reasoning from injury rates and from what the work obviously demands, not from a metabolic measurement.



Corn

Honest caveat. It still belongs on the list. It just belongs on the list with an asterisk.



Herman

That's the top of tier one. Now we go to the jobs where the body doesn't get to reset.



Corn

Job four. Motor-manual logger. Timber faller.



Herman

This one has real data. Heart-rate-derived energy expenditure in motor-manual logging shows significantly elevated physiological workload across the shift. And it gets worse in winter — Grzywiński's work out of Poland in twenty twenty-two found the cold meaningfully increased the physiological cost.



Corn

Why would cold make it worse? You'd think you'd overheat less.



Herman

You're wearing more, you're moving heavier, the ground is worse, and shivering is itself a metabolic cost. Plus the chainsaw work — vibration, awkward postures, carrying fuel and gear over terrain that isn't a path. There's no lift you can do in the gym that prepares you for walking a slash pile with a saw.



Corn

And the posture is the thing that gets people. You're not standing upright swinging an axe. You're bent, twisted, holding a running saw at chest height for hours.



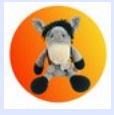
Herman

The vibration alone does damage. Hand-arm vibration syndrome is a recognized occupational disease, and it's cumulative. You don't feel it in year one. You feel it in year fifteen.



Corn

So the logger is a case where the acute and the chronic are both bad.



Herman

Both. Which is unusual. Most jobs trade one for the other.



Corn

Job five. Structural ironworker.



Herman

Climbing and balancing on steel at height while carrying tools and bolting. And I want to be precise about why this ranks above the logger, because the raw energy expenditure might be similar.



Corn

It's the fear.



Herman

You're managing balance, grip, and the knowledge that a mistake is fatal, simultaneously, all day. That's a cognitive load that doesn't show up in a MET value but absolutely shows up in how fast you fatigue. Fear is metabolically expensive.



Corn

And the grip demands are specific. You're not just holding. You're holding while your feet are on a four-inch flange and the wind is doing something.



Herman

There's a reason ironworkers have a culture around it. The job selects for people who can function at that arousal level without falling apart. And it's not that they don't feel it. It's that they've learned to work inside it.



Corn

Is there research on that? The fear component?



Herman

Not in the metabolic literature, mostly because it's hard to quantify ethically. You can't randomize people into a high-fear condition. But the occupational psychology work on arousal and performance is clear enough that we can reason about it. The point is that a MET value is a floor, not a ceiling, for what the job costs.



Corn

Job six. Wildland firefighter.



Herman

This is the data standout. Fourteen-hour shifts. Total daily energy expenditure that can exceed twenty-five megajoules a day. That's six thousand calories. Ruby's work in Comprehensive Physiology calls it one of the highest ever measured in any occupation.



Corn

Six thousand calories. Say that against a normal day.



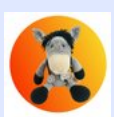
Herman

A normal adult eats two thousand. So this is three times baseline, and it's not a spike day. It's a shift.



Corn

And the multi-omics work is the part that should worry people. Nakayasu's team found tissue damage and acute repair signatures in blood plasma after just forty-five minutes of simulated work.



Herman

Forty-five minutes. That's the first-hour test, and the answer is that the blood is already showing damage markers. Not soreness. Damage.



Corn

And over a season?



Herman

Coker's group tracked season-long effects and found increased visceral fat, elevated cholesterol, elevated LDL, and increased liver lipid. These are people who are arguably the fittest workers on the planet, and a fire season moves their metabolic profile in a bad direction.



Corn

That's the thing the first-hour test misses. It's not just today's exhaustion. It's the debt.



Herman

And I want to do the load carriage mechanism here, because it explains why tier two is a different category from tier one.



Corn

Go.



Herman

Looney's work on soldiers. Carrying forty-four to sixty-six percent of body mass, walking — not running, walking — puts you at eighty-three to eighty-eight percent of max heart rate and fifty-eight to sixty-three percent of VO2 max. And peak walking speed collapses. Unloaded, a soldier can hit one point nine five meters per second. At sixty-six percent body mass, that drops to one point four eight.



Corn

So the load doesn't just tire you. It changes what speed is available to you.



Herman

It changes the physics. You're spending a huge fraction of your aerobic capacity just on locomotion, before you've done any of the actual work. That's the mechanism that separates tier one from tier two. In tier one, the load is intermittent — you pick it up and put it down. In tier two, the load is you. It's on your body for the entire shift.



Corn

And it's why a roofer carrying shingles up a ladder and an ironworker carrying tools up a beam are in different categories even though they're both carrying.



Herman

The roofer gets to put it down. The ironworker's tool belt is on him from clock-in to clock-out.



Corn

That's the top of tier two. Now we go to the jobs where the environment itself becomes an antagonist. Tier three, near the human limit.



Herman

Job seven. Sherpa. High-altitude porter.



Corn

Carrying loads at five to eight thousand meters, where the oxygen is roughly half of sea level.



Herman

And this is our second evidence gap. I couldn't pull a specific occupational study on portering. The hypoxia physiology is well established — above eight thousand meters you're in the death zone, and at five to six thousand you're operating at a permanent deficit — but nobody's done the controlled energy-expenditure work on working porters.



Corn

Which is strange, given how famous the job is.



Herman

It's not strange. It's hard to study. You can't put a metabolic cart on someone at six thousand meters on a glacier. The logistics of the research are as brutal as the job.



Corn

So what do we actually know?



Herman

We know the work is real and the environment is real. At five thousand meters, arterial oxygen saturation in an unacclimatized person can drop into the low eighties. Acclimatized porters do better, but they're still operating with a ceiling that a sea-level worker never faces. Every step costs more.



Corn

And the load itself — is it comparable to the military load carriage numbers?



Herman

Often heavier, in absolute terms. Porters have historically carried loads that would be considered extreme by any military standard. The difference is the pace is slower, because the terrain and the altitude force it. So it's not the same metabolic profile as a ruck march. It's slower, but it's longer, and the oxygen is thinner the whole time.



Corn

Job eight. Saturation and commercial deep-sea diver.



Herman

Working in heavy gear under pressure, often in currents and cold. And the thing that makes this rank so high isn't the work itself. It's the recovery.



Corn

Explain.



Herman

A saturation diver lives at pressure for weeks. The decompression schedule at the end is days long, sometimes weeks. The body is paying for the dive hours and days after the work is done. And during the dive itself, you're in a helmet, in a suit, in cold water, managing buoyancy, managing gas, managing a tether. The cognitive load is enormous.



Corn

So the physicality isn't just the work. It's the physiological bill that comes due afterward.



Herman

And it's a bill you can't skip. You don't get to decide you're too tired to decompress. The pressure decides for you.



Corn

Is the decompression itself physically taxing, or is it just time?



Herman

It's taxing. Your body is offloading dissolved gas, and the process is uncomfortable at best. Joint pain, fatigue, skin symptoms — the mild end of decompression stress is common even on well-managed schedules. And the diver is living in a confined habitat at pressure the whole time, which has its own psychological cost.



Corn

So it's the rare job where the recovery is part of the job.



Herman

Most jobs, you clock out and you're done. A saturation diver clocks out and then spends days paying for the privilege of having clocked in.



Corn

Job nine. Foundry and steel mill worker.



Herman

Ambient heat often exceeds forty degrees Celsius, plus radiant heat from molten metal. And here's the counterintuitive part — the workers wear heavy protective suits, which means they can't sweat effectively. Yamazaki's work calls this uncompensable heat stress.



Corn

Uncompensable meaning what, exactly?



Herman

Meaning acclimation doesn't save you. Normally, if you work in heat for a couple of weeks, your body adapts — you sweat earlier, you sweat more, you sweat more dilute. That's the whole acclimation story. But if your protective suit prevents the sweat from evaporating, none of that adaptation does you any good. Yamazaki's finding is that workers in these suits get, in his words, little psychophysiological benefit from heat acclimation.



Corn

So the standard advice — just get used to it — is wrong for this job.



Herman

It's wrong for this job specifically. The suit is the problem. It's protecting you from the molten metal and trapping you in your own heat at the same time. There's no version of this where you win.



Corn

The radiant heat is doing something the ambient heat isn't, right?



Herman

Radiant heat is directional. You can be in a relatively cool room and still be absorbing a huge heat load from a furnace face. That's why foundry workers rotate positions. It's not just fairness. It's thermal management.



Corn

Job ten. Elite military special operations. Load-carriage infantry.



Herman

This is the ceiling. Sustained movement carrying sixty percent or more of body mass at near-maximal heart rate, for days. Days. And the load is not just weight — it's ammunition, water, comms, medical, weapon. Everything you need to survive is on your back.



Corn

That's the Looney data, pushed to its conclusion.



Herman

It's the Looney data with no rest stops. If walking at sixty-six percent body mass puts you at eighty-eight percent of max heart rate, then doing it for seventy-two hours is a different category of problem. It's not a fitness question anymore. It's a question of how long the body can run a deficit before something breaks.



Corn

Something does break. That's the knock-on effect I want to land here.



Herman

Heat as a force multiplier. At forty degrees Celsius, physically demanding jobs lose roughly one third of baseline work productivity. Singh's work in Health Promotion International is the citation there. One third.



Corn

The foundry worker and the wildland firefighter aren't just doing hard work. They're doing hard work in an environment that's actively removing a third of their capacity.



Herman

That's why they rank above a laborer doing comparable mechanical work in a temperate climate. The environment is an antagonist. It's not neutral background.



Corn

The other knock-on effect is the damage. Firefighters showing tissue-damage markers after forty-five minutes. Season-long metabolic changes. That's not exhaustion. That's injury you can measure.



Herman

Which is the thing the ranking is really measuring, if we're honest. Not how tired you are at the end of the day. How much physiological debt you've accumulated, and how much of it you can't pay back.



Corn

The ranking moves from heavy but rhythmic, where the body gets recovery between exertions, to sustained whole-body, where there is no recovery, to near the human limit, where the environment and the load together exceed what acclimation can offset.



Herman

That's the arc. And it's why the top of the list isn't just the heaviest thing. It's the thing you can't adapt to.



Hilbert

Four hundred and twenty dollars.



Corn

What's four hundred and twenty dollars?



Hilbert

That was the price of a square of modified bitumen in the summer I spent on a roofing crew. We did flat roofs on big-box stores. Retail. The kind of building where the parking lot is bigger than the building.



Herman

You've done one of these.



Hilbert

I have. And I want to correct your ranking logic, because the roofer belongs on the list, but not for the reason you gave. It's not the shingles.



Corn

It's not the weight?



Hilbert

The weight is a problem for the first week. Then you get strong enough that it's just work. What doesn't get better is the kneeling. Six hours on your knees on a hot membrane, and the membrane is hot because it's been in the sun since seven in the morning. You're kneeling on a surface that's been sitting at sixty, sixty-five degrees. And you can't get up and down every few minutes to relieve it, because getting up and down is its own cost. So you stay down.



Herman

The damage is cumulative.



Hilbert

My knees click. They've clicked for thirty years. I don't think about it most days. But I hear it every time I stand up from a chair.



Corn

The ranking by energy expenditure misses the thing that actually ends careers.



Hilbert

It misses the thing that ends the career. Energy expenditure tells you how tired you are at the end of the day. It doesn't tell you how many days you have left. And those are different questions.



Herman

Which is a distinction the research doesn't really capture. The metabolic studies measure the shift. They don't follow the worker for twenty years.



Hilbert

Our foreman was a former wildland firefighter. He'd done fire seasons. He said roofing was harder on the body day to day, even though firefighting was harder in absolute terms. And I believed him, because he'd done both and he wasn't the type to complain.



Corn

That's the acute versus cumulative distinction.



Hilbert

Firefighting is hard for a shift. Roofing is hard for a career. If you're ranking by how bad a single day is, fire wins. If you're ranking by what you're left with at sixty, roofing might.



Herman

That's not something the metabolic data can answer. The studies are cross-sectional. They measure the shift, not the arc.



Hilbert

I don't know which metric is right. I just know they're not the same metric.



Corn

If you had to pick one for the ranking?



Hilbert

I'd pick the career metric, because that's the one that actually decides whether people can keep doing the work. But I understand why the episode uses the other one. It's the one you can measure.



Corn

That distinction between acute intensity and cumulative damage is exactly the right note to end on. Because it changes what the ranking is even asking.



Herman

If we're ranking by daily energy expenditure, the wildland firefighter wins, and the six-thousand-calorie number is the reason. If we're ranking by career-ending damage, the ranking reshuffles, and the roofer and the foundry worker move up.



Corn

Then there's the heat question. If the planet keeps warming, and forty degrees Celsius already removes a third of baseline productivity, what happens to the jobs at the top of this list? Does the foundry worker become unemployable at current output?



Herman

The foundry worker has air conditioning and engineering on his side. The wildland firefighter doesn't. You can't air-condition a forest.



Corn

The job at the top of the energy-expenditure ranking is also the job most exposed to the thing that's getting worse.



Herman

Which might be the real story here. The ranking is a snapshot. The trend line is the thing to watch.



Corn

That's the show. Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer, for running the desk. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

If you've got a prompt, send it in. We read everything. Email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Corn

We'll be back soon.