

Getting Circus Fit

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By Linda Redeffer ~ Southeast Missourian

Ringling Brothers clown encourages children to adopt a healthy and active lifestyle while having fun.

Sometimes just clownin' around can keep you fit.

Area children got that message recently when a Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus clown, Bonzo Crunch, got them up and hopping around at HealthPoint Plaza.

Bonzo gets a workout even when he laughs; his whole body shakes with mirth.

He juggles. When something catches his attention, he does a double take that involves his entire body. Sleight-of-hand magic involves more than just his hand; Bonzo gets a real workout doing his act.

A group of about 35 youngsters, ranging in age from preschool to junior high, first learned a little about nutrition and good food choices, when Bonzo asked if they liked pizza. To see if they were really paying attention, he slipped in a trick question.

"Do you like dog food?"

The grossed-out children were indeed paying attention.

Then Bonzo got down to business.

"Even a skinny clown like me has to be CircusFit," he declared.

The goal of CircusFit is to encourage children to adopt a healthy and active lifestyle while having fun. This philosophy mirrors that of Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey performers, who represent a cross-section of some of the world's finest athletes. Whether soaring from a trapeze high above the arena floor or taking a pie square in the face, the physical requirements



Bonzo presented a taste of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus to children at HealthPoint Plaza. (Fred Lynch)

are demanding and require a lifestyle focused on activity and proper nutrition, keys to a healthy performance inside or outside the center ring.

'The easiest thing in the world'

Bonzo led the children through the four steps for CircusFitness.

"The first one is the easiest thing in the world," Bonzo said as he popped open a bottle of water and took a swig. "If you're going to keep your body in shape, always drink a little water."

Then he advised them to stretch, then "make your muscles strong and make your heart beat nice and strong."

The children who came to see Bonzo apparently aren't sitting around a lot watching television. They're not zombied out in front of video games. Most of them looked fit, not fat.

And when Bonzo asked them all to get up and work out with him, if it were possible to harness the energy the children were expelling, gasoline prices would drop out of fear for the competition.

Bonzo warmed the crowd up by leading the children through head, hip and shoulder rolls to unkink their muscles.

Once unkinked, the muscles were then ready to be made strong. The children followed Bonzo as he stood first on one foot and then the other for strength and balance. Then they all dropped to the floor to keep up with Bonzo while they did sit-ups and pushups.

Throughout the exercises, the clown reviewed the four steps for being CircusFit: "hydrate, stretch, make your muscles strong and your heart beat nice and strong."

To achieve the last step, Bonzo and the children ran in place and bounced around with jumping jacks.

"Do you feel more awake?" Bonzo asked.

"YEAH!"

"Do you feel your heart beating fast?"

"YEAH!"

"You have just got CircusFit."

Some of the children were running headlong into the spirit of the program -- and clowning a little on their own.

Nine-year-old Alexia New, a student at St. Vincent's school, said she was already doing one of the four steps to fitness.

"I like to drink water," she said.

And Jackson White, 7, who goes to Deer Creek Academy -- and was a clown at a recent school talent show -- said he likes to lift weights to stay in shape. He claims he lifts 200 pounds, but his mom said he really lifts her hand weights. More like two pounds.

That's what it's all about -- clownin' around. And being CircusFit.

Ringling Bros. will be playing at the Show Me Center in Cape Girardeau April 17 through April 19.