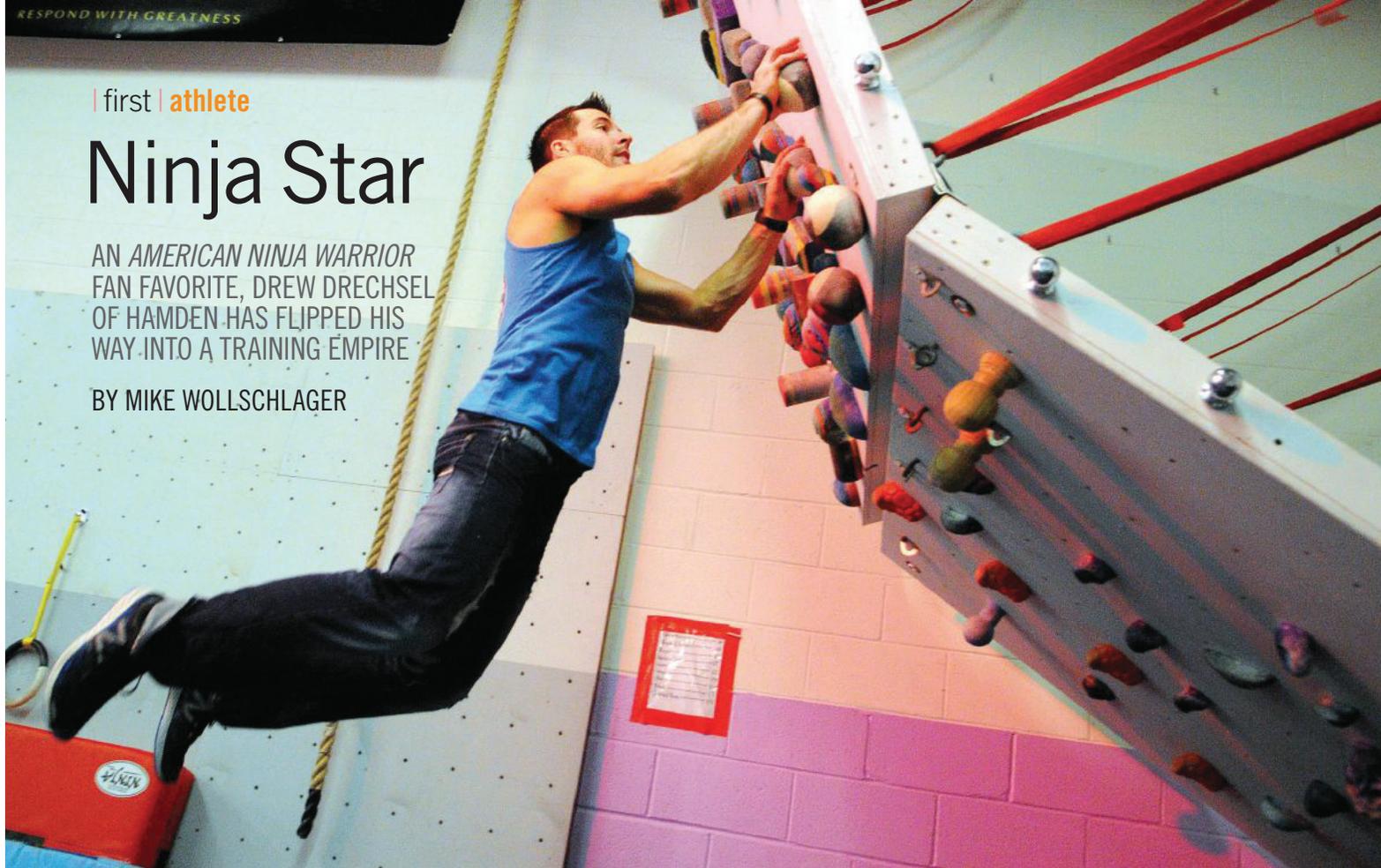


| first | athlete

# Ninja Star

AN AMERICAN NINJA WARRIOR FAN FAVORITE, DREW DRECHSEL OF HAMDEN HAS FLIPPED HIS WAY INTO A TRAINING EMPIRE

BY MIKE WOLLSCHLAGER



Children learn many important things in school. Little bricks of knowledge and information come together to form the foundation on which a future is built. Drew Drechsel learned his biggest lesson one day in high school when he was 15. He just happened to be backflipping off a vending machine at the time.

“Oh, parkour! That’s so cool! I didn’t know you did that!” a fellow student exclaimed.

“That was the first time I ever heard the word ‘parkour,’” the 28-year-old star of NBC’s *American Ninja Warrior* says of the sport in which you run, climb and leap your way through an obstacle course as fast as you can. The South Florida native nicknamed “Real Life Ninja” now calls Hamden home and says his Sherman Avenue gym is the first Ninja Warrior-only facility of its kind. But it all started with parkour, or more accurately, the 2004 Summer Olympics.

“I was watching men’s gymnastics,

watching them all flip around. I was like, I wanna do that. I wanna learn how to backflip,” Drechsel says. “So I dragged my mattress down the stairs into my backyard, and after two days I’m doing backflips. ... I was 15 years old — you *know* I’m doing them at school, you *know* I’m showing off to all my friends. I’m flipping off vending machines.” That night he went on YouTube and watched parkour videos.

After high school he moved to Gainesville, got a job on a used car lot and worked out a deal with a mixed martial

arts gym to teach after-hours lessons in parkour and freerunning (a form of parkour in which acrobatic flourishes are added for effect). His exploits landed him spots in the World Parkour Championships and on the TV show *Jump City: Seattle*. He debuted on *American Ninja Warrior* during season 3 in 2011 and has appeared on each subsequent season. In 2016 Drechsel was the top-ranked ninja in both the U.S. and Japan, and he is considered one of the most successful foreigners ever to compete on *Sasuke*, the Japanese TV show that served as the

**Top:** Drew Drechsel demonstrates his skills at New Era Ninjas in Hamden.

**Opposite page:** Drechsel oversees one of the classes at the Sherman Avenue facility.

PHOTOS: CHRISTIAN ABRAHAM





inspiration for the American version. Season 10 will be filmed between March and June and broadcast on NBC this summer.

Connecticut has been Drechsel's home since he moved to Fairfield in 2014 when an opportunity arose to help run events and competitions at the Gymnastics and Cheerleading Academy of Connecticut. While at a GCA event, a parent told Drechsel about a guy named Tom Alberti. "I caught wind of someone here in Hamden who wanted to open a Ninja Warrior-only facility, and that's something that has never happened before," Drechsel says. "There's been gymnastics gyms with ninja, there's been parkour gyms with ninja. ... I wanted to have the first Ninja Warrior-only facility." Drechsel called Alberti, owner of New Era Gym, and set up a meeting. A couple of months later, in the spring of 2015, Drechsel opened New Era Ninjas in a secondary building on the property and started running birthday parties and enrolling people in classes.

"After a year and a half, we completely filled [the original] space," Drechsel says. "We had no more room for any more kids to come to classes. ... We were turning away more people than were actually in classes." The interest in the program is not difficult to understand. It's a unique after-school activity for kids and a fun alternative to treadmills for adults. The large building's single room is splashed with colorful mats, rings, bars, ramps and trampolines that provide infinite athletic possibilities to the creative mind. And then there's Savage, Drechsel's pet hedgehog who's always a hit with the kids. But make no mistake: Drew is the draw.

"NBC has constantly highlighted me, every year," Drechsel says. "They say good things about me and I do good things on the show, so it definitely helps. And people come here and they see what's going on and their kids love it." When interacting

with kids Drechsel takes on a role akin to a responsible older brother, the type who teaches you something new or helps you work through a problem. The students have an obvious respect for Drechsel, but he gives it right back.

"I think he's a really good teacher," says Michael Sherman, 9, of Redding. "I've never had a better one." And what about Drechsel's chances on the upcoming season of *American Ninja Warrior*? "I think he's

the strongest ninja in the world. I think he's gonna win season 10."

He might be the strongest, but he's definitely the busiest. Despite buying out its neighbors and doubling its size, New Era Ninjas is full again with 360 kids and 80 adults signed up for weekly one-hour sessions. Drechsel also offers private meet-and-greets with families.

About a year ago, Drechsel opened Real Life Ninja Academy, a 10,000-square-foot facility in Windsor where he was able to hire fellow ninjas to teach. "[The ninjas] are doing what they love to do. Supplying ninjas with jobs, giving little ninjas a place to train; everybody just wins." Not coincidentally Drechsel navigates the business aspect of his life like an obstacle course as well, deftly moving from one thing to the next. "We're opening more gyms. We've got another location we're looking at in Arizona right now." Drechsel also owns the Real Life Ninja Equipment Line, which can be found in gyms all over the country.

"Most people, they grew up and they learned how to adult and they stopped being a kid," Drechsel says. "Well, even though I learned how to adult I still went and played around on monkey bars, I still jumped around, I still climbed trees, because it was fun."

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