

A-Z of Pull-up Training

By Graham Hayes

A **Active Shoulder** The shoulders are said to be active in the pull up if they are shrugged or "in the ears" at the bottom phase of the pull up, and pulled back as the athlete begins to ascend. Pursuing active use of the shoulders in the pull up gives a longer line of motion thus more work and more power. It facilitates the swing in the kipping pull up, meaning faster cycle time and more pull ups. And also protects the shoulders from the harsh loads that can occur from a plyometric exercise like the kipping pull up. Training tip: Practice shrugging while hanging with full arm extension from a pull up bar or rings to develop your shoulders strength.

B **Big Chest** A pull up should be led with the chest. This is facilitated by pulling the shoulders back and looking up.

Training tip: Reinforce the big chest by Pulling to the bar so that your chest makes contact.

C **"C" Shape** The beginning of the kipping pull up is initiated by driving the chest forward and letting your feet go behind. In profile your body will be in a "C" shape.

D **Dead Hang Pull Up** A dead hang pull up is a pull up from the bottom position of the pull up where no momentum or conserved tension will assist the next pull up. This is a useful style of pull up for building strength in beginner athletes. **Training tip:** Although harder than strict pull ups it's possible to rest in the hang and get a few more pull ups. Try getting 2 or 3 more when you think you're spent on a max pull up test.

E **Elbow Driven** When ascending don't think about flexing your arms, instead visualize driving your elbows down to the ground.

F **Firty-Forty-Fifty Pull Ups** Some guys might think their hot stuff doing a set of fifteen half range of motion pull ups at the health spa, but for a real CrossFit standard of performance you need to be thinking thirty. Then forty. Then fifty. Everyone is capable of getting thirty pull ups, those that never make it are simply lazy. Beyond fifty is the realm of specialization, if you love pull ups then push beyond the half century. If you have less than thirty pull ups now, then resolve to fix it within a year.

G **Grease The Groove** Grease the groove is a method made popular by Pavel T where short non-challenging sets of an exercise are taken throughout the day. For example an athlete with a max of twenty pull ups will do a set of ten at three different times in a day. He'll focus on staying fresh and making each rep a quality rep. This is a great way to boost your max set. Training tip: Set up a permanent pull up bar in a place you go by several times a day. Every time you pass the pull up bar, do a set of pull ups at 40-60% of your best.

H **Hanging** Hanging from the bar is a good way for beginners to build arboreal strength. The stronger athlete can hang with varying degrees of arm flexion up to the top of the pull up. This is an isometric exercise and will build strength quickly and also work your grip. **Training tip:** Do competitive hang offs with a training partner to see who is the last athlete hanging. This adds some fun to a boring and painful exercise.

I **Injuries** The most common injury with large amounts of pull up training is to the tendons on the inside of the elbows. At it's most pleasant they will be a little tender the next day, at it's worst you won't be able to extend your arms at all. Keep an eye on the volume of pull ups that you are doing or planning to do. Going from 100 a month to 100 a day is a good way to lose the use of your arms. Remember to build the volume incrementally. And never be ashamed to scale a workout if the volume is much higher than you have been previously doing. However if like the author you aren't too bright and overenthusiastic about training, both requisites for a high fitness level, then you will inevitably mess your arms up. I found that gentle exercises without weights that move the shoulder through its ranges of motion without arm flexion to be beneficial as gravity tugs softly at your elbow joint. Examples are front raises, lateral raises and slow swinging of the arm in clockwise and anti-clockwise, remember all without weights and keeping the arm as straight as your injuries allow.

J Jumping Pull Ups The jumping pull up is a great exercise, it's useful for the beginner to experience high intensity work with the pull up and at high volumes it will leave any athlete gassed. The pull up bar needs to be low enough that you can jump properly while holding onto the bar. You simply jump and pull with the arms at the same time, then lower quickly landing on your feet with legs slightly bent ready for the next jump. **Training tip:** Try to get 100 of these in one set, or do them using the Tabata interval.

K Kipping Pull Ups These are the king of the pull ups and the default style for CrossFit workouts. It's performed by creating momentum in the horizontal plane and transferring it to the vertical by a powerful reversal of hip direction timed with a pull of the arms. With all pull ups the work done is the same, the cycle time in the kipping pull up is much faster than any other pull up thus the power is much greater. More power means more fitness. **Training tip:** If not already your pull up of choice then start learning the kip and make them your default pull up. Doing this exercise using the Tabata interval is an excellent gauge of your ability, shoot for 100 total reps in the eight intervals.

L L-Pull Ups L-pull ups are the daddy of the strict pull ups. While hanging from the bar flex at the hips so that your legs are parallel to the ground, and at right angles to your body. Then pull without any jerking in the torso until your head is over the bar. The set is terminated when the feet drop below the bottom. **Training tip:** Not ready for the L position? Tucking your legs, or keeping them straight with the feet lower are sound ways to lower the load of this challenging exercise.

M Muscle Ups The pull up is a gateway movement to the muscle up. The muscle up is a basic gymnastics exercise that can be performed on a horizontal bar or rings, it combines a pull up and a dip. The athlete performs a pull up and then rolls his arms into the bottom position of a dip before pressing into the support position. This movement requires good strength and coordination to get through the transition. **Training tip:** Haven't got a muscle up? Perform lots of ring pull ups and dips concentrating on full range of motion. 10 rounds of: 10 ring pull ups, 10 ring dips is a sure fire way to build the strength you need. (to get your own set of rings, [click here](#))

N Negative Pull Ups Negative pull ups are where the athlete lowers themselves slowly from the top of the pull up to the bottom of the hang. Typically you get to the top by doing a jumping pull up. These are another good tool for building strength in beginners. However these will make you very sore if abused.

O One Arm Pull ups The one arm pull up is an otherworldly feat of strength that very few will achieve. There are easier versions like holding onto the wrist or the bicep of the pulling arm with your free arm. These are legitimate exercises in their own right and may help you in a quest for the true one arm pull up.

P Push At The Top On the ascent of the kipping pull up the path of travel is a curve, to return along the same path you must "push the bar away" at the top of the pull up. Failure to do so means traveling in a straight line downwards, not only is this slower but also destroys your swing so energy created coming down doesn't transfer into the next rep. **Training tip:** If you notice yourself muscling the descent then you're not pushing the bar away at the top sufficiently.

Q Quality In your training have a standard of what a good pull up is, and stick to it. Don't count reps that fail to make the standard. A good standard to have is full extension at the bottom and adams apple over the bar at the top.

R Rings Rings are an alternative to the horizontal bar. You will find it very difficult to kip on rings so the upper body is better worked. Training with or even just fooling around on rings will develop huge upper body strength which will transfer into more pull ups. **Training tip:** **If you don't have rings get them ASAP**, if you can't afford rings then Judo belts or heavy duty lifting slings make very adequate low cost substitutes.

S Strict Pull Ups The strict pull up is the default pull up of the bodybuilding world. Luckily even this hasn't tarnished its reputation as a first class exercise. Doing 20 of these consecutively is very respectable. **Training tip:** As a CrossFitter you wouldn't want to do these in a WOD but they make for a very good warm up or cool down exercise.

T Tap Swings The tap swing is the method by which you can learn the beginning phase of the kipping pullup. It's performed from the hang with arms extended and heaving the chest forward and feet back to get the "C" shape. Then swinging back to a hollow shape with the chest closed and the feet forward but not lifted. Then swinging back to the "C" shape. **Training tip:** If you're just beginning to learn the kip, or need to tidy it up practice tap swings in your warm up.

U Underhand/Overhand/Mixed Athletes will generally favor one style of pulling up grip. The overhand or pronated grip is generally the most popular and most amenable to kipping. The underhand or supinated is generally better for L-pull ups and weighted pull ups. The mixed grip is good for most styles of pull up. **Training tip:** In high volume WODs change your grip frequently when breaking up pull ups.

V Visually Directed Look up at a point on the ceiling when doing pull ups. This will help you lead with the chest. The temptation when tired to drop the head will only make you more tired and end in an prematurely terminated set.

W Weighted Pull Ups Adding weight to the pull up is a fantastic way to build pulling strength. There are a variety of ways in which the weight can be added. Holding a dumbbell between your feet is a good option for CrossFit style circuits where the weight can be dumped easily. Using a dipping belt or a rucksack is better for heavy weights.

X Xposure. Ask a demolitions expert what recipe of explosives he would require for a particular job, you'd probably hear "P" for plenty. That's the same recipe for explosive (I know its cheesy) gains in pull ups. Keep exposing yourself to more and more pull up work and the big max sets will come. If you take anything away from this article make sure it's the need to do lots and lots of pull ups.

Y Your Plan So how are you going to get to thirty pull ups? You need a plan, are you going to do grease the groove? Gradually increment the number of reps you do in your warm up? How often will you test your max? Keep a journal and write your training down. Little dips in performance now and again are normal. Little dips in workload now and again are beneficial. But the general trend will be more pull ups and more weight. If you notice you've stagnated, or you've been doing the same number of pull ups in your warm up for about three months, just add some more. You can always manage another rep, and that's progress.

Z Zero Pull Ups? The most important thing when training and learning of otherworldly standards is that progress takes time. There are no shortcuts. It doesn't matter where you start it's where you end up that counts. If can't do any pull ups then make jumping pull ups your default pull up. Throw negatives in occasionally and heed the warning of their propensity to make you sore. If you have access to an assisted pull up machine then use it, slowly and incrementally reduce the assistance. Practice tap swings, and hanging from the bar. With a little bit of effort you will soon have your first kipping pull up then the flood gates are open and you'll soon be on your way to thirty.

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