

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

The Front Handspring

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A front handspring is a common gymnastics skill that is often demonstrated outside competitive gymnastics as well. There is an appeal to being able to run forward, kick through a handstand and spring back to your feet. It has also found application in the upper levels of other sports such as a handspring throw-in on the soccer field. While less intimidating and safer to learn than a back handspring, a front handspring is far more difficult to perform correctly.

Performing a correct front handspring requires you to override several natural reactions during the course of the skill. It also requires a strong kick accompanied by a strong push with the opposite leg. Good shoulder flexibility is necessary to optimize push off the floor and allow for efficient positioning.

There are two prerequisites to a front handspring. You must be able to do both a decent hurdle and a solid kick to handstand. The kick to handstand should go straight to the handstand with proper shoulder extension.

Preliminary drills

The first stage in learning a front handspring is to learn how to override your natural inclination to tuck forward when rotating forward. Since a handspring is led by the heels, virtually everyone who tries a front handspring will want to tuck forward.

This drill for this stage requires substantial matting. A minimum of a good 8-inch training mat is needed. Start by kicking to handstand on one side of the mat. From the handstand, fall flat onto your back on the mat. Ensure proper body alignment during this drill: your shoulders should be completely pressed open and you

will be in a slight arch. Squeeze your heels together and keep your butt tight. Watch your hands the whole time. Your entire body should contact the mat simultaneously. Allowing your heels to contact the mat slightly ahead of the rest of your body is acceptable. If any other part of your body contacts the mat first it is an indication that you rounded your back, piked, or broke your shoulder angle, all of which are severely detrimental to a good handspring. Finish the drill lying on the mat with your arms still by your ears and your head tilted slightly back looking at your hands.



<http://media.crossfit.com/cf-video/treefall.mpg>

Concurrent with the handstand fall drills, you should practice blocking drills. The propulsion off the floor in a handspring comes from an aggressive block through your shoulders, not a push with your arms. Start in a lunge and kick to handstand, reaching forward as you kick up. Your shoulder angle must remain open throughout; do not reach down to the floor with your hands. Bring your hands to the floor by kicking your rear leg up. The line from your wrists to your rear leg should remain straight. Just after your second foot leaves the ground block through your shoulders and bounce into a handstand. Snap your feet together aggressively as quickly as possible after the kick and try to push your shoulders open for the block. As your block becomes more dynamic, increase the difficulty by setting up a single panel of a 1-inch mat to block up onto. Continue to increase the height as you are capable.



<http://media.crossfit.com/cf-video/blockdrill.mpg>

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A front handspring is a relatively easy skill to spot. The gymnast should begin about three large steps away from the spotter, to the spotter's left. The spotter kneels on the floor. The gymnast takes one step and hurdles into a front handspring. The gymnast should place his hands on the floor about one foot before the spotter's position. As the gymnast kicks into the handspring the spotter places his right hand on the gymnast's mid-back while simultaneously grasping the gymnast's right wrist with his left hand. The wrist grab must be done with the left hand supinated.

Step-by-step mechanics

Be sure to work through the progressions. You will progress much further by insuring proper technique and practicing the drills than just trying to throw the skill. Keep in mind that a handspring is a lead-in skill, so it not only needs to complete, but should actually build momentum for subsequent skills.

Bridges are another key factor in a good front handspring, and you'll need to practice them regularly. In a supine position, raise your elbows toward the ceiling, place your hands on the floor by your ears, bend your legs, and then push your hips toward the ceiling and arch back. Ideally a bridge should have straight legs and shoulders pushed out over the **hands**. When you do bridges, push out over your hands so the stretch occurs in your shoulders. An increase in shoulder flexibility will make significant differences in your handsprings.

Approach

The approach to a handspring is a good hurdle. (The hurdle is covered in detail in [issue 51 of the CrossFit Journal](#).) You need to do a low, long, stretched hurdle and focus on reaching forward into the handspring, taking care not to dive into it. Your shoulder angle should not break, but your hands must touch the ground before your second foot leaves the ground. Stretch into an aggressive kick toward the ceiling, as if into a tall extended handstand.



The spotter should take care to keep close to the gymnast so that he can use his body to assist in the spot. The spotter's right arm should remain fully bent with his hand very close to his right shoulder and elbow down. The spotter should ensure that the gymnast remains arched throughout the handspring, with shoulders completely open. For now, the gymnast should land looking at the ceiling.



<http://media.crossfit.com/cf-video/fhsspot.mpg>

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Block

As you practice handsprings, focus on pushing your arms up and back as you block off the floor. This is another counterintuitive aspect of the handspring and requires conscious effort to accomplish. Block off the floor aggressively and rapidly. Push completely through your fingertips as you leave the floor. Do not lift your hands off the floor, push the floor away from your hands. From the kick and through the block, drive your heels aggressively through the handstand.

Landing

After the block, continue to drive your heels to pull them back underneath you. Your handspring should land on the balls of your feet with your feet behind you, and your body in a slight arch. If you get enough block and maintain proper positions you will feel a spring forward as you land, almost forcing you to run, jump or fall forward. This forward momentum will later be used for another handspring, front tuck or other front tumbling skill. Your head will be neutral, but your shoulders will remain completely open. You should be as stretched as possible through your upper back and shoulders. Remember that your head and hands will be the last things to reach vertical.

Common mistakes and corrections

1. Sitting up is by far the most common mistake in a front handspring. Virtually everyone will have this problem at first. Even when proper progressions are followed, staying open must be emphasized constantly, and in some cases additional drills are required. To help develop a feel for the proper position coming out of a front handspring, stand about 2 to 3 feet from a wall with your back toward the wall. Reach straight up and look up at your hands, then arch back and place both hands on the wall. Now push back on the wall while squeezing your butt and pushing your hips forward. Make sure you press your shoulders open and let your hips pull you forward. Under no circumstance are you to pike, or sit forward to pull away from the wall. Doing this drill properly this will help reinforce the proper position of the handspring. This same drill can be done with a coach standing in and substituting for the wall. The coach just stands behind the gymnast and catches his hands as he reaches back.

Hand spotting the skill can also help to reinforce proper positioning. A spotter can place pressure on the upper back and anchor one hand back so that the gymnast cannot sit up immediately out of the handspring. The earlier this habit is broken the better. If allowed for too long this can have a negative impact on front tumbling for a very long time.

2. Another very common mistake is to reach down to the ground when kicking into the handspring. By reaching for the ground the shoulder angle is broken. This causes the shoulders to proceed in front of the hands and severely compromises the block. Stretch forward in the lunge to prevent this from occurring. Your hands are brought to the floor by your rear leg kick, not by reaching down to the floor. Really focus on a completely open, stretched body, kicking to a tall handstand for the handspring.
3. The converse of reaching to the floor is diving into the handspring, which you need to avoid. This occurs when your second leg leaves the floor before your hands contact the floor. A significant loss of power will be experienced as a result of diving into the handspring. Ensure that your hands contact the floor just before your second foot leaves the ground.
4. Many gymnasts will bend their legs as they kick into the handspring. This is the result of an effort to get through the skill quickly. While the kick needs to be fast and aggressive, the kick also needs to be extended. Thinking about kicking through the tallest handstand you can manage will help to ensure a straight leg kick.

Connecting handsprings

Once you are consistently making handsprings with proper positioning, you can start working on connecting two handsprings together. This can be done two ways: a handspring step-out to another handspring or a handspring-flyspring. A flyspring, or bounder, is a handspring that takes off from two feet.

Start working on handspring-step-out-handspring. Be sure not to rush into the second handspring. Instead, focus on performing your first handspring well. If the first handspring is strong, adding a second handspring is not difficult. For a handspring step-out just keep

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driving your kicking leg through the handspring and do not bring your legs together. You will land on one leg with your other leg extended in front of you. Ideally you should land with your rear leg well behind you so that the landing drives right into the lunge for the second handspring. Initially you will find that you land leaning a bit back and you'll have to push hard into the second handspring. This is due to insufficient block and turnover. As your handsprings get stronger, this transition will become effortless.

Good block and turnover are essential for a strong handspring flyspring. If the first handspring does not turn over sufficiently, the punch will go up instead of forward. You must land your first handspring with your feet well behind you in order to perform a powerful handspring flyspring. A very common mistake is to let the first handspring degrade by reaching forward and piking to try and initiate the second handspring. This is counterproductive. Be sure to focus on performing the first handspring well. If the first handspring is solid, it will be much easier to make the flyspring. It is recommended to develop a strong handspring flyspring before working handspring-front tucks, as working the handspring-front tuck will encourage too much flight after the first handspring and it is difficult to turn over sufficiently once this habit has been developed.

Keep a focus on technique and proper body positions and your handsprings can progress rapidly. Resist the temptation to short cut the drills and rush the front handspring. Proper mechanics will make a handspring effortless, while improper mechanics will result in a squatted dead-end handspring regardless of the power put into it.



Roger Harrell is a former competitive gymnast with twenty years of experience in the sport. He has continued to train in the sport well beyond his competitive years. He has run several competitive gymnastics training programs and currently focuses on coaching adults and bringing the benefits of gymnastics to those outside the usual community. He is the developer, designer, and webmaster of www.DrillsAndSkills.com.