

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Support Strength on the Rings

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This article is the first in a series that will cover the fundamentals of gymnastics ring training in fine detail. We will begin with what is the foundation of ring work, the support. Although it may seem a straightforward and simple move (especially to those of you who have never had occasion to try rings yet), understanding the theoretical and practical details of the support will give you a deeper understanding of the potency of ring training in general.

The simplest description of a support is to hold your body above the rings with straight arms. Most people's first experience with ring training is entering the support position and shaking like a madman. This brings up a common misconception about the rings: that they are unstable. However, the rings have a fixed point of equilibrium. Push the rings and they will always, eventually, come back to where they started. So, if the instability you feel doesn't come from the rings, where does it come from? Your brain and central nervous system. Your brain is sending a signal to your arms to hold the rings still. Noise within the signal, like static on the radio, is what causes the shakes. As your signal to noise ratio improves, so does the stability of your support. The performance benefit here is that you are teaching your body to apply force more productively. Ring training is very effective at inducing this noise because the rings move in frictionless plane. The slightest change in muscular tension will cause movement in the rings because there is no friction to hold them in place.

There are three main things to look for in a proper support. First, the arms should be straight. There are no variations to this. A slight bend is not straight. Second, the shoulders should be pushed down ("active

1 of 3

Support Strength on the Rings (continued...)

shoulders,” as described in “The Lifting Shoulder” in *CrossFit Journal* issue 37) and the chest up. The shoulders should not be drifting up toward your ears. You want to be actively pushing down on the rings at all times. Third, you want to keep your arms off the straps. The size of the frictionless plane we talked about earlier is defined by the distance between the attachment point on the ceiling to the rings. If you are bracing your arms against the ring, you are reducing the size of the plane dramatically. And by introducing friction into the system, you are reducing the potency of the exercise. Keeping friction out of the system is goal behind these next two finer points. First, you want to keep your arm off of your body as well. If you lock your arms against your sides, you are limiting the potential for movement, so you want to minimize contact between your lats and your arms. Next, you will also want to turn the rings out to about 30 to 45 degrees. Having the rings parallel is technically correct, but a support with rings turned out is more “mature.”

To train for the support, set the rings at a height where you can step into rings and get into a support with your feet barely off the ground. Some people have a tendency to shake pretty hard at first, so don't be any higher than you're willing to fall from. If you are strong enough to hold a mature support, go for it. There is no reason for baby steps if you can start here. If not, you can start out with the rings tightly held to your sides. As your comfort grows, let the rings drift out a bit from your body. If all of these options are too difficult, you can begin your support training in a push-up position on rings lowered to just a couple inches above the floor, on your knees if necessary. The same rules apply in the push-up support: arms straight, active shoulders and the rings turned out.

Another incremental move you can work on to develop your support ability is the jump to support. It's also just plain fun and, done fast for reps, much more challenging and metabolically stimulating than it might sound, even for more advanced athletes who already have good support ability. It is an excellent substitute for ring dips. If you are not ready for those yet, you can sub these into any workout that calls for dips. You will want to set the rings a little bit higher for this. Begin standing inside of the rings. I like to keep my arms straight the whole time, pulling them in toward the body as I jump; this means they will be out my sides a ways in the starting position. Now, jump and press down on the rings, which will

bring them in toward the body and propel you up into a support. Hold briefly and then lower yourself under control back to the ground. I don't mind bent arms on the lowering portion (essentially the negative portion of a ring dip). The higher you set the rings, the more you will need to jump and press. Start conservatively and raise the rings inch by inch to find an appropriately challenging height. When you've raised them enough that your arms are parallel to the ground at the start, you will notice that this is a good way to begin training for an iron cross.

When you have developed the ability to perform a mature support, try holding it for a minute with perfect form. Once you have done this, you are well on your way to becoming a ringman. Once you have learned a proper support, you will have a foundation to delve into a wide variety of skills, from simple dips and muscle-ups to more advanced gymnastics moves such as the cross, planche, and handstand.

The support is the foundation of all the major skills on the rings. If you have never given any thought to your support position, spend some time over the next month developing a strong support position. Try to build up to a one-minute hold, or even two full minutes. Each month we will introduce a few new skills, but the foundation you build in the form of a fundamentally virtuous support will be crucial in the more advanced stages.

Support Strength on the Rings (continued...)



(top-left) Everything wrong! Arms are bent, resting against straps, and chest is down.

(top-middle) Shoulders are elevated (passive).

(top-right) Technically correct, but “immature.” Shoulders are active, but the rings are braced against his sides.

(bottom-left) This is a technically correct, mature support position.



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