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Training the Front Lever on Rings

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The front lever is one of the basic strength holds on rings that is most attainable by a non-gymnast. It is an excellent exercise for developing a strong core and powerful pulling muscles. The front lever is also a good example of how gymnasts develop their impressive levels of strength without lifting weights (and it's very popular with rock climbers, as well). Instead of lifting progressively heavier weights to increase their strength, gymnasts work through progressions where they manipulate 1) leverage, 2) range of motion, or 3) momentum. The manipulation of leverage is a pretty well-known kind of progression; the other two are a bit less commonly known but still very useful.

The front lever involves holding your body in a rigid plank in a horizontal position under the rings, with straight arms and your body perfectly parallel to the ground. To “hit” the move in competition, gymnasts are required to hold it for a minimum of two seconds. Deductions are taken if there is any bend in the arms, if the body is not level to the ground, or if the line of the body is not straight. In gymnastics, all moves are assigned a grade from A to F in terms of difficulty. The muscle-up used to be an A-level skill, but it was recently demoted to zero value. The iron cross is a B-level skill. As difficult as it is, the front lever is only an A-level skill. Don't pass up the front lever because of its “easy” rating though. That just

1 of 4

Training the Front Lever on Rings (continued...)

goes to show how insanely difficult gymnastics really is. The lever is very challenging, especially if you don't have the body type of a typical gymnast (i.e., small and light). Your reward will be greater upper-body and core strength, which will carry over to pull-ups, L-sits, and a whole variety of other, seemingly unrelated exercises.

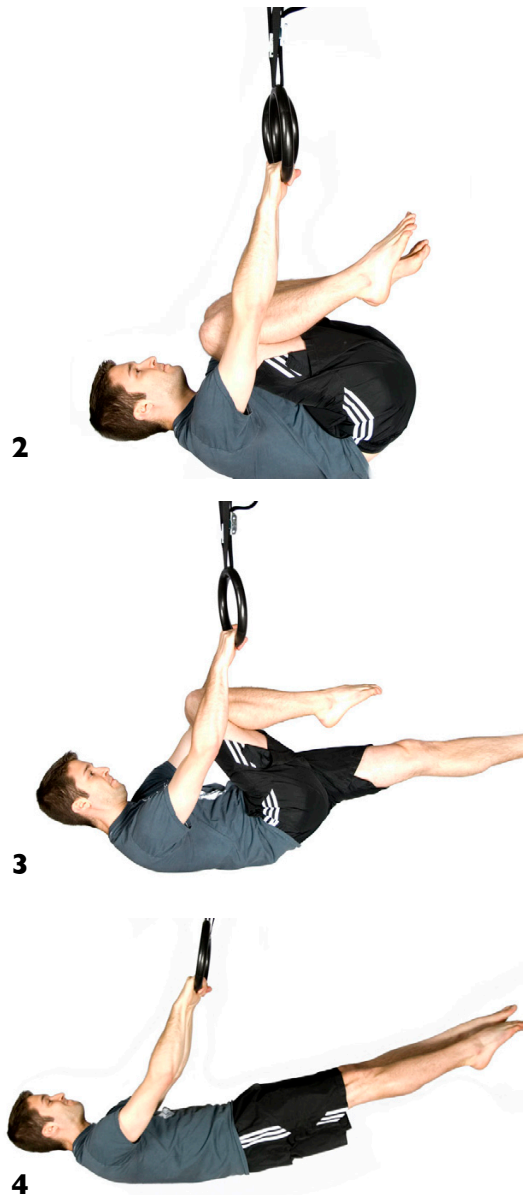
The technique of the front lever is simple to describe but difficult to master. The main requirement is total body tension. It is especially important to keep your glutes and abs tight. This not only ensures a straight body line, but it also boosts your strength throughout your body. With a solid platform in place, your lats, shoulders, triceps and back muscles can do their job as the prime movers. A false grip is not necessary for a front lever and can actually make it more difficult for most people. You can just hold the rings normally with a firm grip. Keep constant pressure on the rings by trying to pull them downward toward your hips, which will activate your lats. It can also help to pull the rings together, which will activate the muscles of your chest and help lock your arms into your lats.

Training for the front lever is also considerably safer for your joints than learning some of the other high-level strength skills, such as the iron cross or maltese, because you are not supporting your weight on top of locked elbow joints. The front lever is not too hard on the body. But because training for the front lever means that you will be hanging upside down, I would recommend having something soft underneath you and to make sure your hands and the rings are not sweaty. And don't let go when you're upside down. I've never had to tell anyone that more than once!

The leverage progression

The front lever is difficult because you have to support your entire bodyweight at the shoulder joint alone. Your body provides lots of resistance in the form of a very long lever arm; the longer the lever, the greater the resistance. But the opposite is also true. If you shorten the lever, you can reduce the resistance. This is our first method of training for the front lever. By pulling in your legs until your knees touch your chest, into what is called a tucked position, you can significantly reduce the leverage you have to work against (photo 2).

The next step is to get into the tuck position below the rings and then extend one leg straight out (photo 3). The idea is to create an incremental increase in resistance



by gradually extending the one foot farther out from your body. At first, your foot should be close to your hip. Once you can hold this position, try moving the foot out farther, and farther, until eventually you can hold it straight and in line with your body. Then begin gradually moving the other foot out in the same manner, moving the foot closer to the knee of your straight leg, then the calf, then the ankle (photo 4). This is another incremental increase in resistance.

Training the Front Lever on Rings (continued...)

Some coaches use the straddle front lever in the teaching progression instead of the one-leg extended version. Both provide a lower-leverage version of the move you can use to build strength and technique on your way to the full skill. I learned my progression from Brad Johnson, who is a very strong former gymnast. He can hold a one-armed front lever with a dumbbell in the other hand! I prefer this progression for non-gymnasts, because unless you can do the splits, the straddle front lever is more of a hindrance to achieving progress. If you have good flexibility, give the straddle lever a try. If not, you can make good progress without it.

The range-of-motion progression

Another way to train for the front lever is to work in a shorter range of motion. Start in an inverted hang (hanging upside down, with toes pointed toward the ceiling, straight arms, and a straight, rigid body position) and then lower yourself down toward the front lever position with a straight body and legs extended. Go down as far as you can under control and then pull back into an inverted hang. This is one rep. At first, you will probably be able to lower your body a few inches before you have to pull back up into the inverted position. Over time, you will develop the ability to get your body closer and closer to parallel with the floor.

Another method, first taught to me by Coach Glassman, is to work on lowering yourself all the way down as slowly as possible. This is called a negative and it is commonly used to learn the front lever and other, higher-level strength moves. To do it, get into an inverted hang and then, with straight arms, lower your straight, planked body as slowly as possible toward parallel with the ground (photo 5). At some point you will lack the strength and your body will fall back down into a hang. Get yourself back up into an inverted hang in whatever way you can and then perform another full negative. Keep doing reps until you are basically in a free

fall on the way down. This exercise also provides a great anatomy lesson: the next day, you will know exactly where your lats are!

The momentum progression

The final method is to use momentum to get yourself into the full front lever position, hold it for as long as possible, and then swing your way back. I learned this exercise from world champion and four-time Olympian, Jordan Jovtchev when I asked if he had any cool front lever exercises. I was pretty amazed with what he came up with. This exercise is cutely named the ice cream maker. A lot of really hard exercises have cute names, because only gymnasts can do them, and most gymnasts (unfortunately) in this day and age are children.

To perform an [ice cream maker](#), first do a pull-up and then, at the top of the pull-up, push your body straight back and you will swing into the front lever position. Hold it for as long as possible and then swing back to the top position of the pull-up. Swing again to the front lever position and hold. To get your swing going, you need to push your upper body away from the rings and simultaneously pull down on the rings (photo 6). It takes a while to get the rhythm of this exercise, but once you do, it is a very smooth movement.

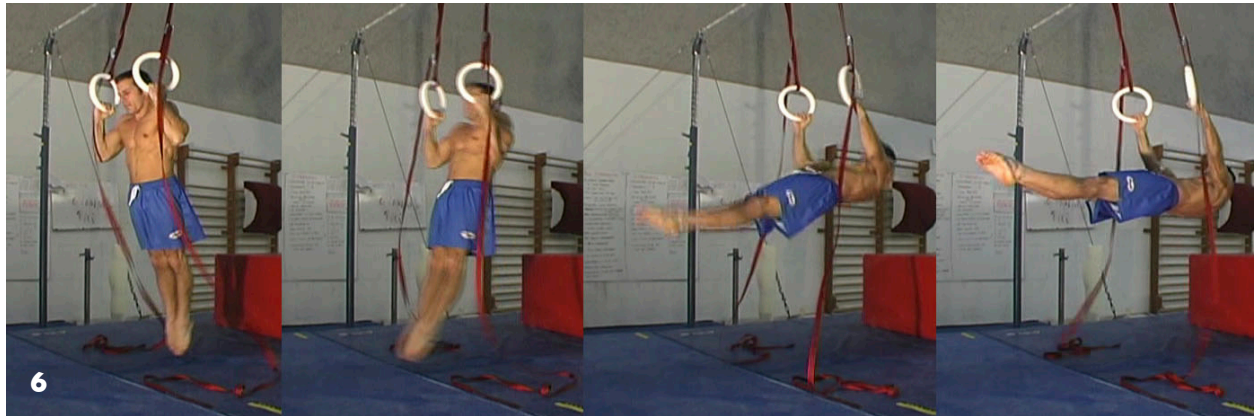
This is a great exercise for doing high reps, especially once you get the rhythm. It can also be a fun substitute for pull-ups in a workout like “Helen” or “Fran.”

Training for the front lever

There is no right or wrong way to train for the front lever. For the typical CrossFit athlete, it will be difficult to train the same way as a gymnast would. What I recommend is doing a small amount of work very frequently at the end of your warm-up. On CrossFit’s strength days, you can do a bit more work on it after you’ve done the exercises from the workout of the day.



Training the Front Lever on Rings (continued...)



I also recommend working step by step through the three progressions I've outlined. First work with the leverage progression for a month or two. Holds of five to ten seconds are sufficient, although you can go longer earlier on. As soon as you are able to support yourself in a position, move up to the next hold in the progression. Some people recommend not moving up to the next step until you can hold the previous one for 30 to 60 seconds, but I think most people can progress faster than that. Three to five holds per workout is a good amount.

When you get to the point where you can hold the position with one leg extended and the other foot at your knee, then it's probably time to switch over to the momentum progression. I really like the negatives that Coach Glassman recommends. They are a very potent stimulus and you can make great progress with them. It's great for breaking through that final plateau.

Then, after training for two to three weeks on negatives, switch to the momentum progression. The ice cream maker is great because it lets you get the feel of a full front lever, even if it's only for half a second. The key is learning how to generate a high amount of body tension in the front lever position.

Once you are able to front levers, you can maintain the ability by subbing ice cream makers for pull-ups occasionally and by doing front lever holds on strength days and occasionally in your warm-up.

Are you ready for the front lever?

I receive a lot of e-mails from people who have followed a front lever progression for several months and made almost no progress. My first question is always "How

many pull-ups can you do?" My recommendation is to train the front lever as early as you want, but not to expect great progress until you can do about fifteen kipping pull-ups and one weighted dead hang pull-up with about 20 percent of your bodyweight. This is just basic upper-body strength. Expecting quick progress on advanced gymnastics moves without even a basic foundation of strength is pretty silly. The best correlate I have found for front lever performance is the weighted pull-up. I've seen several people get the front lever on the first try without ever training for it. The one thing they have had in common is training weighted pull-ups. Most of them could do a few pull-ups with an extra 80 to 90 pounds (roughly 50 to 60 percent of bodyweight). If your progress stalls on the front lever, give it a rest and train weighted pull-ups for a while.

I don't want to discourage anyone from getting started with the front lever, though. It's a safe move to train, it's really fun, and it gives you a nice taste of what gymnasts do to get strong.



Tyler Hass is the founder of ringtraining.com and designer and producer of the Elite Rings. His company is dedicated to spreading gymnastics into the broader fitness world. He can be reached at info@ringtraining.com.