

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Scaling Down CrossFit Workouts with Rings

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Gymnastics is one of the most the most versatile and potent tools for developing strength and fitness. But its vastness and complexity have left its value almost entirely untapped by most of the fitness community. With CrossFit, however, we have a unique framework for exploiting its fitness potential for non-specialists. Rings are the apparatus that develops the most strength, with the least technical learning curve (and with low equipment requirements). A beginner can easily and safely learn a number of moves on his first day. Most CrossFitters are familiar with ring dips and muscleups, but that is just scratching the surface.

In this article, we will look at ways you can scale workouts to make them more accessible for beginners by using the rings. Other reasons to substitute ring exercises for different moves include the portability and versatility of rings. You can develop as much upper-body strength with a set of rings as you can with dumbbells or even a barbell, and the whole set fits in a small backpack and can weigh as little as three pounds.

This article is all about making changes to CrossFit workouts, so I should mention a few things about programming first. When you are modifying a workout, the main goal should be to preserve the stimulus of the workout. Substitute apples for apples. If heavy squats are called for, then running ten miles is not a good substitution. If no weights or other heavy objects are available, then single-leg squats, jumping exercises, or even sprinting are closer approximations and better temporary substitutes for squats. Secondly, when you are scaling down a workout, the goal is to eventually do

the whole thing as prescribed. So the substitutions here are also designed to reinforce basic skills that are vital to success later on.

For workouts that actually do prescribe ring exercises (typically muscle-ups or dips), the scaled-down versions will help develop the strength and control you will need to eventually do them as written. When most people think of rings, they think of the extreme difficulty. But they are actually quite accessible for nongymnasts and basic proficiency on them develops very quickly with even short doses of repeated exposure.

I will share a few of the methods I have used on myself and others to help develop the more challenging skills. Simply spending time on the rings is the first and most important thing. Your central nervous system needs time on task to adapt to the frictionless plane. Other skills unique to the rings, such as the false grip, need to be hammered in early because they cannot be developed overnight.

Pull-up substitutions

The pull-up is the first exercise a lot of people think of when they hear “CrossFit.” Given their importance in the program, everyone should be able to do pull-ups, or, in the beginning, at least a worthy substitute. With rings, you have a few options.

1. Ring rows

The ring row is a horizontal pulling exercise that can be easily modified for different levels of resistance. Just

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bending your knees shortens the lever of your body to make it a bit easier. Performing them from a seated position makes it even easier. You can also raise or lower the rings to change the resistance. Walking backwards also changes your body angle and therefore decreases the resistance. Using any one or a combination of these methods will allow people of all abilities to train for pull-ups without being able to do one. Compared to lat pull-downs or curls, ring rows also do a better job of preserving the stimulus of the workout.

2. Jumping pull-ups

Another option is the jumping pull-up. As in the kipping pull-up, you are using your lower body to generate some of the power. With the jumping version, though, the majority of the power is from the lower body. To adjust the difficulty, all you need to do is change the height of the rings relative to your head. If the rings are level with your shoulders, you can use your legs to assist you the whole way. Every increase in height after that will mean you have to jump or pull to complete the rep.

Jumping Pull-ups



One thing to be cautious of is the negative portion of this exercise. It can be good to train with a slow, controlled descent for low reps because it will make you stronger. But high-rep negatives are also notorious for causing a lot of soreness and muscle trauma (and can be a factor in rhabdomyolysis). Just be careful, because it's easy to crank out a lot of reps on this exercise without realizing how torn up you will be the next day.

Ring dip substitutions

The ring dip is another CrossFit staple that can give people trouble. Many people without access to rings substitute three or four bar dips for every ring dip. For a beginner, this can be a bit daunting. There are other approaches that both preserve the stimulus and get you on the rings.

1. Ring push-ups

Like the ring row in relation to pull-ups, transitioning from horizontal to vertical is a good way to develop the dip as well. With the ring push-up, you can more easily adjust the difficulty, but you still experience the challenge of supporting yourself on the rings. Elevating

the rings will increase your body angle relative to the floor, which makes the ring pushup easier. From the knees, it gets even easier.

Ring Push-ups



2. Support holds

Just holding yourself in support above the rings is a challenge. You have to engage every muscle in your upper body just to keep the rings from moving away. If you substitute a 5-second hold for each dip, you can create a challenging workout that will help you adapt to the rings.

3. Jumping dips

The jumping dip is another great exercise for people who can hold a support at least briefly but don't yet have the ability to do a full-range dip. As with the jumping pull-up, you will be using your legs to overcome the strength deficit. At the easiest level, your feet will still just barely touch the ground in the support position. From here, you squat down until the arms are in the bottom dip position and then jump back up into a support. As the rings get higher, you will need to both jump and push with your arms to get back up to the support. As the rings get up to your head, it becomes essentially a jumping muscle-up.

Muscle-up substitutions

The muscle-up is probably the hardest rings skill you will find in the WOD. It is difficult because you have to transition from a full-range pull-up to the deepest dip you have ever done, all while maintaining an unfamiliar false grip. For people who can't do a muscle-up, the standard substitution is 4 pull-ups and 4 dips on bars. To me, this creates an entirely different workout. It's not a bad workout, but it's definitely a different stimulus. Personally, I prefer to keep the workout on the rings, as most people need more time on the rings and need help with specific requirements unique to the muscle-up.

Muscle-ups



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1. False-grip pull-ups and ring dips

My favorite substitution for the muscle-up is to do one ring pullup with a false grip and one ring dip for every muscle-up. The false-grip pull-up is very helpful in your quest for the muscle-up, because a huge source of failure is having a weak false grip. Until you have trained your body to pull with a false grip, you will lose most of your power when using this grip. The only way to get it back is to train the false grip often. The pull-up should be done as high as possible, ideally until the chest—not just the chin—is at ring height. You should try to get to the point where you are just about to start the transition.

The ring dip needs to be so deep that you almost start the transition back down into a pull-up. Only with a full-range dip will you develop the strength and flexibility in your shoulders that are required for the muscle-up.

2. Jumping muscle-ups

This is really just an extended version of the jumping dip. I'm actually not a huge fan of this exercise, because it doesn't teach you the important things about how to do a real muscle-up, especially with regards to the transition. You can get away with the worst technique imaginable and not even know it. The useful thing about this exercise is the negative. You want to go through the downward transition from above the rings (the bottom of the dip) to below them (the top of the pull-up) slowly and under control.

Doing the muscle-up in reverse can teach you several important things about the actual muscle-up. For example, you will notice that you don't go in a straight line up and down. Your shoulders go around the rings. And the rings stay close to your body, not drifting far away. As you transition down into the pull-up, re-establish the false grip and maintain it all the way down, so you still have it and are ready for another rep once you reach the bottom.

3. Rowing muscle-ups

The rowing muscle-up is a cool exercise, because it is a very close approximation of a real muscle-up and it requires no spotting from a partner.

Start with your feet on an elevated surface such as a block, chair, or box. It needs to be sturdy and secure. The move begins just like a ring row, but now, you will also set a false grip, just like with a muscle-up. It is also important to make sure that you start out behind the

rings, so that the rings are hanging at an angle. As you get into the transition point, you want the rings to be hanging vertically. But if you start directly under the rings, your body will move forward and the transition will become impossible.

From the starting position, in a plank below the rings, pull the rings to your chest. Then initiate the transition by curling your whole upper body forward and over the rings. Once over the rings, you simply press (ring dip) up to a support. During the entire exercise, your legs will be pushing down on the box, giving you an extra boost. As you get more advanced, your feet should start out higher relative to your hips. When you are just getting started, you might even have your feet fully on the ground. I really like this exercise, because it reduces the difficulty to a more manageable level but still teaches you all of the elements of proper technique and lets you feel the actual path of the movement, albeit with assistance.

I have described several of the methods that I use to scale down CrossFit workouts for beginners, with minimal changes to the integrity of the workout and while setting the groundwork for future success on and off the rings. Next month, I will go over methods of scaling up CrossFit workouts for advanced athletes.



Photos of Rowing Muscle-up on following page

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.

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Rowing Muscle-up

