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Blood, Blisters, Sexism and Pull-ups

There's no need to rip your hands up in everyday training. Pär Larsson explains a pull-up technique that might hurt your ego but not your hands.

By Pär Larsson

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Courtesy of Pär Larsson

"Do No Harm"

—First rule of medicine

I don't mind calluses. No one particularly cares what my hands look like. I personally don't care who does more pull-ups faster than I do in a generic WOD at CrossFit SoCal as long as I'm having fun and getting a good workout consistent with my goals. I do, however, care if I'm doing a pull-up test for work or a competition—and I really mind if my hands are bleeding or if pieces of them are missing. Blood makes a mess that eventually has to be cleaned up, and call me a sissy, but pain hurts.

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Thirteen years of doing pull-ups, rock climbing and being tested on max consecutive pull-ups for Navy special programs taught me how to avoid busting up my hands with a minimum of effort and no fancy gear, gloves or tape. I don't want to go off on a rant here, but judging by the number of CrossFit athletes I see with bloody hands and ripped blisters, plenty of people can learn from my mistakes, and this might be something worth watching for if you're a trainer.

People who don't have a history of upper-body strength training or rock climbing are at comparatively greater risk for palm injuries when they start getting into CrossFit more seriously. They get excited about newfound strength and skills, and their consecutive and cumulative pull-up numbers per day or week increase dramatically. Part of this is due to a sexist society at large that discourages young girls in particular and regular people/cubicle-dwellers in general from climbing trees and rocks or developing

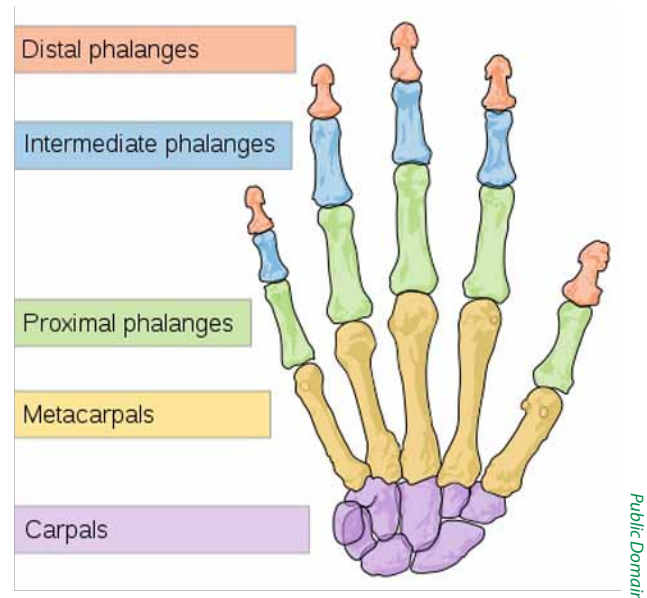


Courtesy of Pär Larsson

Your "no-tear" training grip.

upper-body strength. Anorexic-looking teenage role models also contribute to young girls in general not wanting to be strong or able to do basic fitness exercises. Some of those same people later discover CrossFit and the fun of being able to do pull-ups, and they go hog wild on the WODs and rip their hands to pieces.

Training



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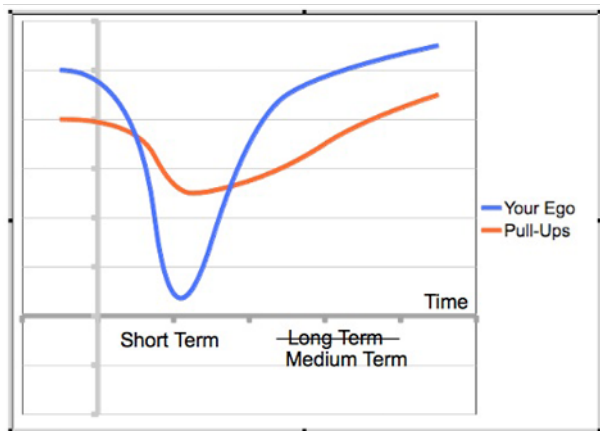
The bones of the hand. Keeping your metacarpals and proximal phalanges in line during pull-ups can prevent hand tears.

For training purposes when doing pull-ups, keep your metacarpals in line with your proximal phalanges; i.e., your hand bones and the first bones in your fingers. This sucks because it's harder to do pull-ups with your center of gravity an inch lower, and it takes more finger/forearm strength. The first week or two or five, you might have to go back to using a band sometimes, or doing jumping pull-ups on a box, or using an easier band. I understand this might hurt your pride, your ego and your self-esteem like it did mine, but as long as I get the workout I need I see no need to care much if I beat my friends in an everyday training environment. At least I don't care as much compared to when my job or future career in the military is on the line. Plus, I don't have to worry about caring for ripped and bleeding hands. Go rock climbing a few times and you'll learn a ton (I did)



Courtesy of Pär Larsson

The training grip in action.



"In the long term we are all dead."

— John Maynard Keynes

about the 10 million ways you can use a handhold. This "training grip" eliminates tons of friction on the top inside of your palm muscles and skin, which is what causes the ubiquitous blisters there. Rock-climbing bonus: the sport can also teach you how to get yourself and your friends out of a canyon when a thunderstorm rolls in and people start getting scared.

Business

For competition or tests (i.e., business purposes), you rock out with a full grip, surprising all your friends and making your competition cry. This is the grip the vast majority of people unfortunately use on a regular basis, as it puts your center of gravity as high as possible relative to the bar, gives you maximum grip strength and also regrettably leads to blisters, blood, bomb craters/gunshot wounds in your hands and a usually false sense of badassness.

Don't use this grip unless it really, really matters that day how many consecutive pull-ups you do. This approach would be best for:

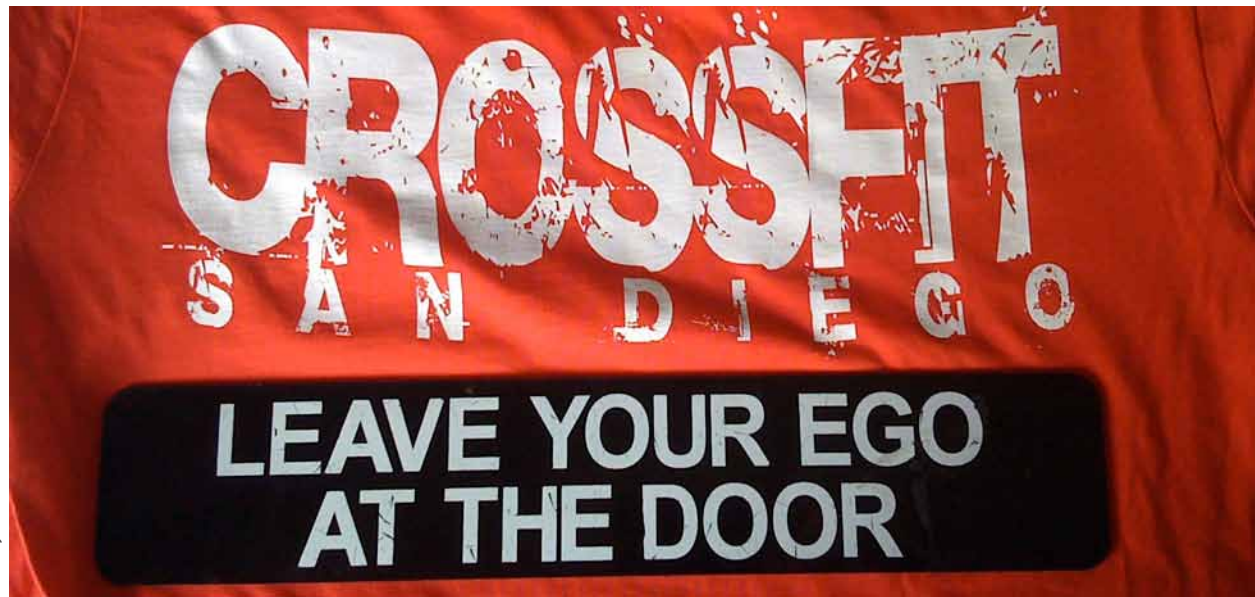
- Competition.
- Various military/fire-rescue/police physical tests.
- When you're running from the mob/cops/mafia/werewolves/someone's angry husband/your ex-wife and need to clear a few high fences quickly.
- When you want to impress someone.

In those cases, do what you have to do, and when the blisters rip ... well, suck it up, buttercup.



Courtesy of Pär Larsson

The "business grip" for all-out pulling.



Courtesy of Pär Larsson

The shirt is full of wisdom. Bloody hands and missed workouts are not part of smart training.

Counter-Arguments

"Easy for you to say! You can actually do pull-ups hanging from your fingers, you condescending jackass." But I was not always able to do this. I sucked at it for years, then started climbing and figured it out. Just trying to help.

"Train like you fight and fight like you train. Hoo-yah! Ooh-rah!"

Feel free to always use live ammo in training. Feel free to beat me in the WOD every day. Feel free to always go 100 percent in training so you're tired and all beat to hell when they bang on the door at 0200 and tell you to get in your wet wetsuit in the middle of winter to get guys out from underneath our own frickin' submarine in 10-foot seas. Feel free go for that one-rep max every day at the gym, especially the week before the CrossFit Games or before the big job interview/vacation/deployment. While you're doing that, I'll be the old guy in the corner with an emphasis on having fun, safety and constant mission readiness.

"I heard about this one guy who does this thing and never rips his hands."

I heard the moon is made of cheese.

"But for chest-to-bar pull-ups, I'm not gonna be able to hang from my fingers."—CrossFit SoCal athlete.

You might not be able to, or to do as many as you're used to right now, but you can work up to it. Once you've done that, you no longer have to worry about bleeding palms or putting on gloves, and you will have much better grip strength plus the option to make your pull-ups marginally easier on tests or in competitions whenever you feel like it.

Pull-ups

Pull-ups are by far the biggest culprit when it comes to ripping hands in a CrossFit environment. Your ego is guaranteed to take a bit of a hit while learning how to save your palms from blisters and blood, and your workout partners may make fun of you for not being able to do as many as you usually do or having to use a band or box while your grip and forearm strength gradually adapt to the increased workload in your regular everyday WODs.

Kettlebell Swings

Kettlebell swings can occasionally cause blister issues and palm injuries. The same principles as for the pull-up grip apply, with the added concern that you absolutely cannot allow that load to slip away from you in mid-swing (or overhead) if people or kids are running around. You want the fingers to do most of the gripping, with the top "meaty" part of your palm doing as little rolling/rubbing/moving as possible. This involves your fingers making contact with the handle first, then sliding down toward the kettlebell so that your palm is just barely touching the handle.

Olympic Lifts and Deadlifts

These lifts have their own grip requirements beyond the scope of this article (see the *CrossFit Journal* article [Learning the Olympic Lifts: The Grip](#)), and few of us have the kind of grip strength to allow us to deadlift normal WOD loads with our fingers only. You can still pay attention to how that top meaty part in your palm is contributing to your overall grip, though. As long as it's not being doubled over by the force of the bar pressing into your palm and then sliding toward the fingers, your palm should be all right even when doing fast, medium-heavy lifts for time.

Caveat: WODs that include "deadlifts for time" or similar moves at a significant percentage of your maximum load capacity will jar your grip and can easily rip blisters. You should pay attention to all things equally, but this is one of those things you should pay attention to more equally than others if you have pre-existing blisters/calluses and don't feel like dealing with bleeding hands that day.

Weighted Pull-Ups

Weighted pull-ups are generally the bane of blistered hands. Witness Amy H. of CrossFit Salem, who did Murph with a 40-lb. weight vest at a Globo Gym. The Globo Gym people freaked out when they saw the blood. The results of Amy's workout are featured on the cover of this article.

"Dyno pull-ups" count as stupid CrossFit tricks and find the athlete completely letting go of the bar and either

reconnecting with the same or another bar, either above or below, with the same or a new grip style. (The Swedish Special variety: do a normal palms-forward pull-up, let go completely at the top and catch in a reverse chin-up grip before you hit the ground or anything else, then repeat and switch. This is not recommended for people with elbow/shoulder/wrist issues or who aren't already very bored with regular pull-ups.) For these types of exercises, as well as muscle-ups and weighted pull-ups, you're generally SOL as far as saving your palms. Even thinking about doing something like this should tell you to watch out and be careful, no matter how BA everyone in the gym thinks you are. *Caveat athlete.*

Gloves, Leather Grips, Etc.

[Newgrip.com](#), [American-gymnast.com](#) and [Ragefitness.com](#) sell some excellent solutions for those days when you want to really max out on pull-ups and save your palms at the same time. Your gym-mates might giggle a bit, call you Sally and tell you to put the handbag down, but if you're ripping out a set of 20 weight-vested pull-ups on the morning of your wedding, then you're OK in my book. For more details on purpose-made gear, how to tape your hands if needed and also on how to deal with hand wounds once you do have them, see gymnastics and CrossFit coach Phil Savage's excellent *CrossFit Journal* article from 2008, [Hand Rips: Causes, Treatments and Preventions](#).



Courtesy of Pär Larsson

***Does this make you cool? Perhaps, but it also means you can't train for a few days.
By altering your grip, you might be able to bypass the blood.***



Courtesy of Pär Larsson

The middle ground between training and business grips.

Other Grip Techniques

There exists a middle ground between the training and business grips, with the distal thumb phalange supporting your fingers on top of bar, which might require you to slightly cup your hand so that your middle knuckle is actually raised off the bar.

This grip will give you calluses and/or blisters if you use it as your normal training grip. It's also a bit harder to achieve, but it gives you a more secure grip that puts your center of gravity almost as high as the business grip while still somewhat lowering the risk of injury to your palms. Experimentation in a safe environment is highly recommended. Just make sure that the top, meaty part of your palm isn't rolled against your fingers but pushed down towards your wrist as much as possible. Don't experiment on the side of a cliff unless you're roped up, please. Also don't do pull-ups hanging off the outside of a merchant-marine vessel underway in the Persian Gulf (long story).



Courtesy of Pär Larsson

Have fun in the shower, dude.

Calluses

Calluses aren't necessarily a bad thing. You can file them down with a small file or a pumice stone, which may very well be a good idea if you happen to have significant calluses and a big competition or test coming up where you know you'll be placing an unusual and disproportionate demand on your palms. Less bloodstains on your clothes and other people's equipment is generally a good thing and leads to people not considering you a crazy cult member/endorphin addict.

So where's the sexism part? That was the part about a sexist society at large not encouraging young girls growing up to do anything that develops upper-body strength or climbing trees, rocks or buildings. Not to mention the idiotic prevailing stick-thin-and-weak female beauty ideal. Or you could accuse me of sexism when I say the vast majority of ripped hands I see in CrossFit gyms belong to otherwise smart women who just got carried away when they got good at pull-ups and discovered it's fun and cool to be strong. Plus it let me put the word sex in the title to grab your attention.

Murph happens. Accidents happen and can become funny Facebook profile pictures that your "normal" friends are guaranteed to ooh and aah over. But there's no real need to rip your hands apart in a training environment. Of course, that's just my opinion. I could be wrong.



Courtesy of Pär Larsson

Give the author's techniques a try and this carnage might be a thing of the past.

"Don't mess yourself up worse than you were before you started."

—First rule of working out with Pär



Courtesy of Pär Larsson

About the Author

Pär Larsson is a Level 1 CrossFit trainer and recovering Ironman triathlete who has been Ironman-free for almost two years with the loving support of his friends. He's afraid of deep, dark water and became a Navy deep-sea diver/2,000-foot atmospheric dive-suit pilot. He's also afraid of heights and so he naturally became a rock climber. He's currently addicted to cookies and drives past five other CrossFit gyms every day to get to CrossFit SoCal.