

# the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

## Sandbag Training

### Part 2

Brian Jones

In Part I of my series on sandbag training (*CrossFit Journal* 65, January 2008), I discussed the rationale behind sandbag training, talked about how to make a sandbag, and explained the fundamental lifts. This month, we'll take a look at more useful lifts and talk about integrating the sandbag into workouts and training programs.

#### Pressing

Pressing motions done with the sandbag offer a unique training stimulus. Unlike with barbells, or even dumbbells, sandbags sag, shift, and present a surface that is difficult to hold on to and exert force against. In order to maintain the integrity of the load, you have to squeeze the bag together as you press it. Almost any barbell, dumbbell, or kettlebell pressing motion can be replicated with the sandbag, to slightly different effect. Common examples are the overhead press, push press, jerk, floor press, bent press, and, of course, the bench press. Sandbags can add a new dimension to thrusters as well.

#### Pulling

Sandbags also make excellent implements for upper-body pulling motions. The primary difference between them and other implements is the difficulty you will have finding and maintaining a proper grip. In order to get the maximum benefit, grip the fabric of the bag rather than any handles it may have. Initially, the overload on the hands and forearms may be a limiting factor, but your grip strength will quickly build up. For athletes who participate in other sports such as grappling, football, or rugby, this also translates to a



Bent Over Row

much more secure hold on the opponent's gi or jersey. The photos at the side illustrate two common pulling exercises that work well with the sandbag: the sumo deadlift high pull and the bent-over row. Cleans, discussed in part I as a method for getting ready for the hold or carry, are also excellent as a standalone pulling exercise (or, of course as part of a sandbag complex).

#### Exercise combinations

Sandbags are extremely effective in complexes, or combinations of moves performed in sequence, for reps or for time. I describe some of my favorites in this section (most of the elements included are explained in

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## Sandbag Training Part 2 (continued...)



Upright Row

detail and illustrated in my January article), but there are nearly endless possibilities. You could do a version of the “Bear” with sandbags, for example. Or how about clean, jerk, and overhead squat for reps? Imagine that paired, circuit style, with push-ups, for example. Or simply 100 clean-heaves up to a rib-high box or platform, for time? In one of the videos here Kris even demonstrates a rope climb with a 70-lb bag draped over his shoulder. A basic exercise? Definitely not. Interesting and challenging? Yes. Use your imagination.



Overhead Press

### Turkish get-up and squat

Blending together the Turkish get-up and squat into a seamless combination makes an excellent endurance drill. Shoulder the bag on the right side and lie down to begin. Execute a Turkish get-up, and then, while standing, keep the bag on your shoulder and squat (for single or multiple reps). Switch sides by bringing the bag from your right to left shoulder, perform your squat(s), and then return to a lying position on the floor, Turkish get-up style. Repeat for the a set number of reps or for a set time interval.

Turkish get-up and  
squat



### Shoulder, squat, and thruster

Bring the bag from the floor to your right shoulder and then squat. While in the hole, shift the bag to the front of your body and then execute a thruster. Return the bad from overhead to the front rack position, shift it back to your right shoulder, and then squat down and up. Return the bag to the floor and repeat the complex on your left side. This drill is an excellent endurance workout when performed continuously for high reps or time intervals.

Shoulder, squat,  
and thruster



### Pulling complex

This combination is similar to a barbell complex. Perform the following lift sequence doing a single rep for each lift without letting go of the bag at any point. You will return the bag to the start position at the floor between each movement but not release it. Holding on to the sandbag throughout the complex will provide some serious work for the forearms.

1. Sumo deadlift (up and down).
2. Sumo deadlift high pull (up and down).
3. Power clean from the floor.
4. Squat clean from the floor.

That's one rep. Return the bag to the floor and repeat.

Pulling complex



## Sandbag Training Part 2 (continued...)

### Four corner drill

Mark off four stations on the corners of the room and assign a different exercise to each one. Start with the sandbag at station 1 and perform a set of the specified exercise. Then take the sandbag to station 2 using a carry or by dragging. Do the exercise at station 2 with the sandbag and then keep moving on through the circuit carrying the sandbag all the way. Many different exercises can be used for this drill and the method of carrying between stations may be specified in advance.

One of the most brutal variations of this drill uses squats or Turkish get-ups at each corner station. Keep holding the bag throughout the whole circuit and do either maximum rounds in a fixed time or a fixed number of rounds for the best time. If possible, try to take any breathing rest while still holding the bag.

Four corner drill



### Programming considerations for sandbag exercises

Although most free weight exercises can be performed with sandbags, the sandbags' inherent instability will

require that you use a lighter load for most lifts than you would when doing them with iron. For this reason, they are better suited to strength-endurance training and anaerobic metabolic conditioning than to developing limit strength. They are extremely effective as substitutes for barbells in a moderate-load, compressed-time workout such as "Fran" but less so in, say, a pressing workout consisting of heavy singles or triples.

An exception to this, however, is the use of sandbags in high-load static holds, carries, or drags. Barbells or dumbbells will not provide the level of functional overload that sandbags will in these exercises. Sandbags are also much safer if dropped.

If you are new to sandbag training, increase the frequency of your sandbag work gradually, to allow the grip and forearms to adapt. If you are starting a program or cycle using only the sandbag, be sure to limit the amount of work that requires gripping the bag with your hands. Integrating too much grip training into your workouts too soon can rapidly lead to tendonitis of the hands or elbows. Pay close attention to how your joints feel and back off at the first sign of any persistent pain in the fingers, wrist, or inside or outside of the elbow. This is especially true if you are involved in another grip-dependent sport such as judo, jujitsu, climbing, tennis, etc. Cycle your training so that when you increase your sport training, you decrease the amount of grip work in the gym.



Floor Press



Brian Jones holds a Masters degree and is a doctoral candidate in exercise physiology. He is a level-I CrossFit trainer, a strength coach, and judo and Brazilian jiu-jitsu instructor. He is a regular contributor to [MILO](#) and is the author of the classic *The Complete Sandbag Training Course* and *The Conditioning Handbook*, available from [Ironmind](#).