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Scaling Up CrossFit Workouts with Rings

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In my last article (CrossFit Journal 67, March 2008), I talked about ways to scale down CrossFit workouts for beginners by using rings. This month we will be scaling up the difficulty of workouts for advanced athletes. There is absolutely no limit to how hard things can get on the rings. (There are a few moves in the Olympic gymnastics repertoire that even the best ringmen in the world cannot do.) So there are plenty of ring exercises available to endlessly challenge the non-specialists as well. Here are a few ideas on how you can scale up workouts by using rings.

1. Improve your technique.

Just doing the “most correct” version of even the basic ring exercises can boost the difficulty quotient considerably. If you are riding the straps on your ring dips and muscle-ups, then you are not getting the full benefit, or challenge, of the rings. The whole point of ring training is to work in a frictionless plane. If your arms are braced against the straps, then you are introducing friction and support. Using proper technique and keeping your arms off the straps instantly makes these exercises about 20 percent harder—and more beneficial.

2. Try ring push-ups.

In any workout that calls for regular push-ups, try substituting [ring push-ups](#) instead. Lower your rings to just above the floor and do push-ups while gripping the rings, with your toes on the floor. (Or, elevate your feet up to the level of the rings on a box, stack of mats, or what-have-you. Rings increase the depth you can get in the bottom of the push-up, just as parallettes do, but the instability factor makes them even harder. As mentioned above, don't ride the straps!



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3. Substitute ice cream makers for kipping pull-ups or L-pull-ups for weighted ones.

The [ice cream maker](#) is an oddly named but extremely potent exercise. It combines the pull-up and front lever. Done at a rhythmic pace, it can be used in metcon workouts as a replacement for pull-ups. I described this exercise in my front lever article (issue 63, Nov 2007).



A less intense modification, but with a similar training effect, is to try L-pull-ups on the rings instead. Doing pull-ups with your legs extended straight out in front of you at 90 degrees places a heavy demand on the hip flexors and abs, because of the L-position, but it also makes the pull-up harder because it eliminates the kip and alters the back position.

4. Change your hand positions.

You can make ring push-ups and [dips](#) more difficult by using a wider hand position. Also, try turning the rings out (palms forward) rather than palms back or palms facing one another when you hold a support position or do ring dips. These subtle modifications really add a lot of challenge to these exercises.



5. Incorporate L-sits.

If a workout calls for L-sits, try doing them on rings instead of on parallettes. The instability factor makes holding the support position more difficult. Although the support position is more difficult to hold on rings than fixed bars, L-sits on the floor are actually the most difficult variation, because you have to press out enough to keep your butt off the ground and you have to hold a true 90-degree L to keep your heels off as well. Sagging will not fly. With all this in mind, try lowering your rings till your knuckles are just barely over the floor. Now you will get the best—i.e., hardest—of both worlds.

6. Substitute hanging leg raises for sit-ups.

The hanging leg raise is a challenging ab exercise. It is essentially a straight-leg version of the knees to elbows exercise, in which you hang beneath high rings and, with straight legs, lift your toes forward and up until they touch the rings. Don't bend your knees!

If that is too difficult, work up to it by doing hanging knee raises, lifting your knees up to your chest (or as high as possible) and then back to hanging straight to complete each rep.

Hanging leg raises can be used as a sub for sit-ups, although a 1:1 substitution will be pretty brutal. A closer approximation, but scaled a bit higher, would be to substitute these for [knees to elbows](#).





7. Do hip extensions on rings instead of on a glute-ham developer.

This isn't necessarily harder, but it is a great way to do [hip extensions](#) if you don't have a glute-ham developer. Set the rings so they're hanging about 12-16 inches above the floor. Lie on your back on the floor with your arms at your sides, your heels on the rings, and your legs straight. Now, lift your hips off the floor, then bend your knees and raise your pelvis and knees as high as you can (until you are up on your shoulder blades and elbows) and then go back down. The training effect is similar to that of hip extensions, and it works in situations where limited equipment is available.



8. Train like the pros.

Professional or competitive gymnasts don't spend much time on individual skills. Instead, most of their strength and athleticism comes from practicing their routines. You can perform a full ring routine instead of a set of pull-ups, dips, or muscle-ups. A ring routine is a series of moves on rings that flows together into a sequence. The moves are not repeated in succession (e.g., as sets), but they can be included more than once if they are used in combination with something else. I will cover how to design your own routine in a future article.



9. Work with weighted variations of familiar ring exercises.

Adding weight to your body using a belt, vest, or simply a dumbbell held between your feet is a final and very obvious way to scale up your workout. However, don't resort to adding weight until you have perfected your unweighted technique and then can also maintain it with the added weight.

These nine suggestions represent only a sample of what you can do to incorporate difficult ring work into your workouts. But this guide should provide a good starting point for further exploration in scaling up workouts by making the moves more difficult and putting the emphasis on strength. Obviously, if you are interested in shifting the focus toward endurance, you can add more reps as well (or instead).



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