

## It's in the Bag

The real world isn't filled with perfectly balanced, easy-to-grip weights. Training with odd objects such as sandbags is one way to build functional strength for use outside the gym.

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Josh Henkin

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It didn't begin with sandbags. For years I had been working with top strength coaches and had experimented with a variety of training methods. In 2002, a sports medicine doctor told me it was game over. The disks I had herniated at age 14 had come back to haunt me. I was devastated.

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## It's in the Bag ... (continued)

I wasn't ready to accept that I would not be athletic ever again. Deep down I knew the doctors didn't have the last say, and I was going to investigate every method to get back to being an athlete. My exploration in trying to find an effective solution to my injury led me to the concept of odd-object training.

I've always liked using odd objects like stones, logs and tires as training tools, and kettlebell work eased the pain and strengthened my hips and trunk. Sandbags seemed the logical next step. After all, they're less expensive and more versatile than other objects.

Sandbags bridge the gap between the weight room and the real world because they aren't perfectly balanced, calibrated and easy to grip. Sandbags teach athletes how to efficiently co-ordinate different muscle groups precisely because they're awkward. The shape of a sandbag shifts on every repetition, requiring you to activate stabilizers and recruit a wide variety of muscle groups.

Used correctly, sandbags can be even more challenging than free weights. Wrestlers, often among the best-conditioned athletes, have long used sandbags. So have other athletes who need to be explosive, quick, agile and strong.

Everyone talks about "functional training" and "core training" these days. Both terms are overused, but sandbags are great for developing a solid core because both static and dynamic strength can be trained.

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Keith Wittenstein

*Hard up for equipment? Sand is certainly cheaper than steel.*



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Exercises such as planks are great for static core strength. You can make this type of training more functional by performing standing drills that challenge static core strength. Front squats are a great example. The trunk has to resist the forward flexion of the body under a load while the body is moving. We can take this to another level by performing sandbag shoulder squats. This movement is based on the same principle as the front squat but loads just one side of the body. The athlete is challenged to resist rotating, bending forward and bending to the side.

Sandbags can be used very effectively to teach rotational movements. This can help prevent injuries that occur when performing even simple tasks that involve flexion or rotation, like setting a bag of groceries on the hood while looking for your keys.

Sandbags present other benefits to group-training programs such as CrossFit because they provide a way to obtain relatively large quantities of reasonably priced equipment that has little risk of injury. As such, sandbags can be especially valuable for new affiliates without much money to spend. You can use sandbags to teach squatting, pressing, pulling and other fundamental movements. You may even find that some new clients prefer sandbags to other equipment they find intimidating.

***When cleaning a sandbag your grip may not be ideal, so consciously avoid the temptation to curl it up with the arms.***



Courtesy of Josh Henkin

***The half-moon snatch is a great sandbag exercise that includes strong concentric and eccentric components.***



There are sandbag versions of many exercises. As in any training method, proper progression and planning is essential in getting the most out of sandbag workouts. I prefer to start people with bilateral strength lifts, then follow up with explosive bilateral lifts. The final step includes unilateral and complex exercises.

### The Exercises

**The power clean**—This great power move can easily be replicated with a sandbag. The movement is much the same as a barbell clean, but the rack position is different. You can clean the bag to your shoulder, hold it in a neutral grip with one hand on each end, or rack it on the biceps and anterior deltoids with the arms wrapped underneath and around it. Large loads can be used, and technique is essential.

**Clean and press**—As in any clean, avoid the temptation to use the arms because the middle of the sandbag will sink away from the lifter as it is lifted off the ground. The sandbag clean and press is great for developing hip power, but it's especially good for increasing stability and grip and core strength. The sandbag is awkward to grip and hard to balance overhead, so the athlete is challenged to maintain stability at all times. Any deviation from proper pressing form will result in power leakage and a poor lift or a shaky body. Gripping the sandbag is one of the greatest challenges. It's standard to grab the ends of the sandbag and roll the material to create a gripping surface, but there is a great temptation to pull with the arms because the gripping action is so unpredictable. Maintain straight arms, pull the weight with the hips and receive the sandbag so that the hands keep their tight grip on the ends and the elbows are close to the sides of the body.

**Thrusters**—Thrusters are great for overall body training. They also build strength and flexibility. The sandbag equivalent can be very challenging because the constant movement of the sandbag makes the lift hard to “groove.” With some skill and technique, you can use a very strong rack position to transfer a great deal of power to a barbell during a thruster. With a sandbag, the variable shape of the load means you have to work harder to get the weight overhead.

**Front squat**—This movement should be in almost everyone's program, but limited wrist flexibility can make performing the barbell version a challenge. In the sandbag variation, athletes can learn proper squat technique and



Courtesy of Josh Henkin

*The rack position for a sandbag clean requires the bag to rest on the biceps and anterior deltoids.*

get its benefits while working on flexibility. The sandbag front squat would be performed with the rack position of the clean. Other variations include the classic Zercher squat (bag in the crooks of the arms, with the elbows lower than in the rack position for the clean), and the bear-hug squat (holding the bag vertically in front of you).

**Power snatch**—The snatch is great for developing power, and the basic sandbag snatch is no different. The bag is explosively driven overhead and locked out with the hands underneath or on either side of the bag. The half-moon snatch is a variation that was used by wrestlers to develop strength in sport-specific ranges of motion. Its principles are similar to those of the power snatch, but an additional rotational component makes the half-moon

Courtesy of Josh Henkin



*If you want to challenge your core strength, try a get-up with a heavy sandbag.*

snatch a highly valuable lift. Starting with the bag on the ground outside one foot, the athlete grips the bag with a neutral grip and snatches it overhead and lowers it to the ground outside the opposite foot in one smooth movement. This is a fundamental movement because it slowly introduces people to rotation and flexion. A further benefit is the strong concentric and eccentric aspects of the movement. You can modify the exercise based upon people's flexibility and fitness by adjusting both the weight of the sandbag and the height of the starting position. Placing the bag on a bench or box can be appropriate for those who don't have the strength or flexibility to start from the floor with proper technique.

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**Shouldering: This is where the fun really starts. Because the weight rests on the body, greater loads are possible.**

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**Bear-hug hold and squat**—Where you hold the sandbag also makes a large difference in the training effects and complexity of the movement. The bear-hug position is the usual starting point. It is the most balanced for holding the sandbag and actually makes it easier for the lifter to remain vertical. The spine is held in a neutral position and the bag is held so it's vertical. The weight and size of the sandbag can increase over time. Larger sandbags are more challenging than smaller ones of the same weight.

The bear-hug squat provides the athlete with a counter-balance and usually results in a quality squat of greater depth for athletes who have previously struggled to get low enough.

**Zercher hold and squat**—In the Zercher position, the lifter holds the sandbag in the crook of the arms with elbows elevated (unlike in the barbell version of the Zercher, where the elbows are usually closer to the hips during the lift). The sandbag is held higher than in the bear-hug position, so more emphasis is placed on the trunk.

**Shouldering**—This is where the fun really starts. Because the weight rests on the body, greater loads are possible. Nevertheless, only one side of the body is loaded and the lifter has to work hard to maintain proper alignment. There should be no twisting or side-bending. A solid core is essential for proper shouldering of a sandbag.

**Overhead hold**—This is the most challenging position. Everything is under stress: trunk, upper back and shoulder girdle. Holding a sandbag overhead also challenges overall stability and balance.

**Get-up**—Unlike the barbell or kettlebell version, the sandbag get-up places the greatest emphasis on the trunk rather than the shoulder complex, because the bag is held on the shoulder. In a well-performed shoulder get-up, the lifter should be able to rise to the seated position without the straight leg lifting off of the ground. When the leg rises during the first stage of the get-up, it can be a sign of an inability to co-ordinate the abdominals with the hamstrings and glutes.

**Carrying**—Carrying sandbags builds the back, glutes, hamstrings, shoulder girdle, arms and abdominals. It also develops anaerobic endurance in a compromised state. Carrying sandbags can be done for time or distance. Sandbags can be carried in the bear-hug, Zercher, shoulder, overhead or farmer's carry positions.

**Multiple sandbags**—For advanced drills, use more than one sandbag. Variations include one on the shoulder and one in the farmer's carry position, one overhead and one on the shoulder, and one overhead and one in the farmer's carry position.

### A Tool for the Toolbox

One training tool should never dominate an entire program. Every training method and piece of equipment has costs and benefits. Mixing and matching intelligently is the essence of coaching. By introducing odd objects such as sandbags, you can create a well-rounded strength and conditioning program that challenges athletes in new ways and helps them develop functional strength.



### About the Author

*Josh Henkin, CSCS, has been in the strength and conditioning field for the past 15 years. He owns a private training studio in Scottsdale, Arizona, and is creator of [Sandbag Fitness Systems](#). Henkin has been published in over 15 fitness publications and has presented at national strength and conditioning conferences.*

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***Thanks to sandbags and other odd objects, Josh Henkin is now able to work around herniated discs.***



Courtesy of Josh Henkin

***Keep a tight core when shouldering a sandbag. Bending and twisting out of alignment defeat the purpose of the movement.***