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Got Striking?

George Ryan explains how you can improve your fitness by adding striking to your programming.

By George Ryan

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Courtesy of George Ryan

Since 1995, CrossFit has done an amazing job of creating better athletes and improving overall fitness with its “evidenced-based” program. During this time, many fitness programs have come and gone as mere fads, while CrossFit has continued to grow and expand.

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I think the reason for this is threefold:

1. CrossFit truly improves people's fitness levels.
2. CrossFit offers a tremendous diversity of workouts.
3. CrossFit exists as a communal program. As such, people become passionate about CrossFit, and they share their goals and accomplishments along with their ideas and experiences. The result is a cutting-edge fitness program that really works for real people.

Like so many others, I too have been inspired by CrossFit. I have practiced martial arts for over 25 years, I have been a police officer for over 19 years, and I have taught self-defense tactics to both law-enforcement officers and members of the military around the country for over 12 years. As such, I have done a tremendous amount of training in the area of striking; i.e., punching and kicking. Though this striking training is done as self-protection training, it always provides me and my students with a tremendous workout as well. So when I started doing CrossFit, it occurred to me that striking perfectly matches the CrossFit "prescription." It truly is a "constantly varied, high-intensity functional movement."

When training in striking, an athlete utilizes boxing and mixed-martial-arts techniques to engage focus mitts, heavy bags or Muay Thai pads. It is even possible to perform a striking workout without equipment by using shadow-fighting techniques. The workouts can be short or long, but they are very intense. Such striking workouts make people into much better athletes: in order to throw a proper punch—one with true speed and power—you must utilize your entire body. When you add multiple strikes and combinations, you add even greater intensity and output.

As a result, striking workouts can provide you with four major benefits: you can achieve a fighter's fitness level; you can increase your core strength, rotational speed and power; you can develop a sport-specific movement; and you can learn real self-protection skills. These benefits make striking a valuable addition to your CrossFit program.

Achieving a Fighter's Fitness Level

It's no secret first-rate boxers and MMA fighters possess an elite fitness level and are considered some of the world's greatest athletes. A major reason for this is because of the time and effort they spend on their striking training. When fighters are striking with full intensity and proper form, they're operating at a faster and more dynamic frequency



Courtesy of Jaimee Hagaki/Ultimate MMA Magazine

Bas Rutten tangles with Ruben Villareal in WFA: King of the Streets in 2006.

than is inherent in many other forms of exercise. Anyone who's done striking exercises such as Olympic punch-out drills, high-intensity heavy-bag workouts or focus-mitt drills with a partner can attest to the conditioning effects this type of training offers an athlete.

Training in this manner requires athletes to perform at a whole new physical and mental fitness level. For example, kicking, kneeing, elbowing and punching a heavy bag with high frequency and intensity for six three-minute rounds will certainly test an athlete's physical and mental fitness level. How? It requires willpower and aggression to complete all these rounds with the same intensity and conviction with which you started them. You see, most athletes can strike a bag using striking combinations with full power for a short period of time, such as one minute. However, it takes physical and mental endurance to strike with the same consistency, intensity and output for all six three-minute rounds. Striking training is, by its nature, designed to be constant, intense and variable, and it helps build a fighter's fitness level.

Staff/CrossFit Journal



Rotational speed and power come from the core, whether you're swinging your fist or a sledgehammer.

Staff/CrossFit Journal



A strong core will make you a more complete athlete.

Increasing Core Strength, Rotational Speed and Power

In order for a person to properly perform a strike with maximum power, he or she must utilize the entire the body from the ground up. In fact, punching is one of the most rudimentary and functional movements involving the core. Proper punching, for example, shares similar biomechanics with throwing a baseball or a shot put: it requires athletes to use dynamic rotational speed and power. Such movement and power comes from the core, so striking training activates and conditions the core muscle groups.

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A stronger, more developed core is a tremendous benefit in and of itself, but it also enhances a person's overall athletic ability. This is because most sports require athletes to be able to twist and rotate; i.e., throw a ball, swing an implement, twist out of a tackle, etc. Thus, adding striking workouts that consist of punching, elbowing, kicking and kneeing to your programming will make you a more functional and better-prepared athlete with improved overall rotational speed and power.

Developing Sport-Specific Movement

In addition to benefiting the core, striking training also develops lateral movement, a skill that's essential to athletics but is often not a part of people's training programs. Think about it: your workout routines generally consist of the basic elements of pushing, pulling, jumping and running. These are all performed in a linear fashion, so, as a consequence, most individual exercises and conditioning routines only involve linear movements.

However, lateral movement is an essential attribute in the sports world. Whether you're playing sports such as football, basketball, baseball or volleyball or if you are fighting, good lateral movement is essential if you want to compete. In fact, when fighters are training in their striking workouts with focus mitts and heavy bags, they must utilize explosive lateral movement after throwing a striking combination. They quickly step off-line in order to avoid a counterstrike or incoming combination. Fighters do this in order to build a conditioned response that allows them to be safer and more effective at their sport. However, training in the footwork related to fighting and striking will allow any athlete to possess a fighter's explosive lateral movement.

Learning Self-Protection Skills

Beyond offering a methodology for developing and improving overall fitness levels, core strength, rotational

power and speed, and lateral movement, striking training also offers people the ability to improve their real-life self-protection skills. Above all, striking training makes people mentally and physically accustomed to punching and kicking. Also, striking training that insists on athletes using proper form and technique means those punches and kicks will be more effective in a real-life self-defense scenario. In short, the ability to strike hard and fast in order to protect yourself can be the difference between being hospitalized and going home to your family.

So, in the spirit of training to be ready for the "unknown and unknowable," striking workouts are a beneficial addition to any athlete's CrossFit programming. As CrossFitter Brian McIntyre so succinctly put it to me in an e-mail, "We can all sit around and sing *Kumbaya*, but like it or not the world is a dangerous place. Besides running, is there anything more elementarily functional than being able to deliver a powerful and well-placed strike?"



Courtesy of Jessica Houston and West Covina PD Officers

Ken Davis takes a blow from Tony Cortina in this demonstration of striking technique.



Kettlebell expert Jeff Martone hits the heavy bag at high intensity.

Getting Started

It seems that lots of people are kicking and punching as part of their workouts these days. There are classes, DVDs and commercials everywhere. But striking should be all about proper form and movement. It should not be just extending your arm out in a punching motion or extending your leg out in a kicking motion in order to

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increase your cardio. I therefore urge athletes interested in adding striking to their workouts to start by learning the fundamentals of proper punching, kicking and combination techniques from a striking expert. This person can be a fighter at your gym, a self-protection instructor, a striking coach, etc.

There are two essential reasons I recommend you learn striking skills from an expert: safety and maximum effectiveness. First and foremost is injury prevention. For example, a good instructor is going to show you exactly how to make a fist so that you will not break any bones while punching, and he or she can show you how to position your foot so that you will not damage it while kicking. The instructor will also teach you how to use your whole body to strike so the movements generate real power and effectiveness. This leads to proper technique, but it also leads to true and intensive physical training.

I also want to share a few other notes on working with a striking instructor. It is your job to let that person know what your fitness and goals are and what you expect to get out of the instruction. It is his or her job to guide you in the areas of proper technique and safety. One indicator of a good instructor is that the person will insist you start slowly. Proper striking is all about technique.

In addition, a good striking instructor is going to talk to you about always wearing proper hand and wrist protection when striking a focus mitt or a heavy bag. Some trainers will insist that you wear boxing-type hand wraps under your gloves. When a person is spending a lot of time sparring and hitting the heavy bag for a high number of rounds, this is very prudent.

However, the idea behind integrating striking skills into your overall CrossFit programming is to add the techniques to your existing workouts. For example, you can perform your striking combinations on a heavy bag, then swing a kettlebell or do some push-ups. Therefore, it is imperative that you communicate to your instructor that your goal is to be able to transition readily from striking to other forms of exercise when you are discussing hand protection.

I personally favor wearing high-quality MMA striking/bag gloves because they're more versatile for such workouts. They have an open palm so you can keep the gloves on as you go from one exercise to another. This also means, though, that you must regulate the number of rounds you perform as part of your striking training. But, this insistence on quality over quantity in your striking training will be a benefit and not a hindrance.

Strike It Up

Striking workouts have helped generations of fighters increase their fitness levels and develop a host of skills that will benefit them in the ring, in the gym and in the real world. CrossFitters can take advantage of these many outstanding physical and mental benefits by integrating proper striking exercises into their workouts.



CrossFit Striking

Starting in 2011, CrossFit will be offering striking seminars led by George Ryan.

The first certification will be held Jan. 8-9, 2011, at [CrossFit La Verne](#) in California. CrossFitters can expect to learn proper striking technique as well as how to integrate striking into their workouts.

For a complete description of this course, please visit www.crossfit.com/cf-info/specialty_certs.html.



Courtesy of George Ryan

About the Author

*George Ryan is a member of LAPD SWAT and an inductee into the Martial Arts Masters Hall of Fame. He is also a CrossFit Level 1 and CrossFit Level 1 Kettlebell instructor. In addition, George has taught his defensive-tactics system to law-enforcement and military personnel around the country. Finally, George writes articles about defensive tactics for police officers, and he writes a monthly column called "Street Wise" for **Ultimate MMA Magazine**.*