

The Beginner's Ladder

Judd Xavier and Tom Rankin



**Mastering three bodyweight exercises—
squats, push-ups, and pull-ups—can help prepare the non-fit
for full-blown CrossFit, and even make a great WOD for anyone.**

CrossFit beginners have special needs. They need to learn how to correctly perform exercises and also to build the general and specific fitness to endure intense WODs (Workouts of the Day). One tool that CrossFit Silicon Valley has found useful to help create a strong foundation is what we call the "SV Beginner's Ladder," a relatively simple routine that ramps newbies up toward prescribed CrossFit benchmarks.

CrossFit SV Ladder... (continued)

The Beginner's Ladder focuses on three bodyweight exercises: the squat, push-up and pull-up. As a group, these exercises are hard to beat for a number of reasons, and are appropriate for CrossFit rookies and veterans alike. As equipment-free (save a pull-up bar) bodyweight exercises, the squat, push-up and pull-up are important because they each teach beginners how to coordinate their body parts in motion before attempting to control themselves with additional resistance. They hit the entire body head-to-toe, can be done at home, and get beginners used to CrossFit's common *triplet* format, which puts groups of exercises together for 10 to 20 minutes. And, of course, it's good to get used to these three, because they come up again and again in CrossFit. In fact, "Cindy" is specifically composed of these three exercises.



Of the three, the **squat** may be the most important beginner exercise. Every athlete knows that performance suffers greatly when the legs fatigue. Squatting will build the strength and endurance needed to improve future training. The squat fires nearly every muscle in the body in a practical, challenging, coordinated gross-movement pattern. In a video we often quote from, CrossFit boss Greg Glassman calls the squat, "A symphony of contractions," and encourages squatters to "hit every note in the sequence."

Despite its apparent complexity, however, the squat is a natural movement that your body understands. It's also great for posture; Coach Rippetoe, author of "Starting Strength," calls it his "posture alignment tool." And finally, the squat gets you used to hard work as it engages the largest muscles of the body and really gets the heart pumping. High-rep squatting will build the necessary cardiovascular fitness that is required for increasing workload when training.



Push-ups are essential because they develop pushing, core, and stabilizing strength that keeps the midline strong. The strength and endurance gained from push-ups will help beginners master other pushing exercises such as dips, push press, and muscle-ups. Being able to hold the hollow-back and straight plank posture, with gut and butt tight, is also great for posture alignment and is easy to test. Example: If hips and chest touch the ground at the same time, you're doing it right.



Behind squats, **pull-ups** are arguably the second greatest developer of fitness. Pulling strength and endurance may be the most overlooked aspect of general fitness training. The egotistical lure of front-body, mirror-centric exercises can make you forget about the pull-up. And those who do remember it often like to forget it, because the pull-up is hard—harder than simpler, anchored pulling exercises like lat pull-downs and rows. The latter don't require pull-ups' full coordination of the abs, hips, and lower extremities to generate the force and momentum that increases power output and work capacity, which is the name of the game. The poetic Glassman calls it, "an undulating wave of contractions."

Many people who think they are fit struggle to do one or two pull-ups. Many people don't see them as necessary, barely remembering the monkey bars they swung on as kids. But by losing the ability to do a pull-up, we're losing a key athletic function: the ability to climb, to pull ourselves up a pole or over a wall. A quick look at the WODs makes you realize the great importance CrossFit places on pull-ups and pulling variations. Fact: A person is not fit unless able to pull their weight up repetitively.

Learning the Ladder's proper technique: One perfect step at a time

In the very beginning, how you do an exercise is the most important aspect of exercising. Proper form gives you more power and helps avoid injuries. That's why we closely monitor a beginner's technique in the gym and stress self-monitoring while at home. In fact, when our clients first begin the Ladder, we like to say that they technically do not "work out;" rather, they practice "learning and mastering" the three exercises. This philosophy will set the tone for the full-blown CrossFit exercises to follow

CrossFit SV uses the concept of "perfect practice" to help newcomers learn proper technique. It's simple: To do things perfectly, you always practice them perfectly. Developing sloppy exercise habits leads to sloppy performance.

If a person is unable to do the standard exercise correctly, due to weakness or imbalance, we will modify it to their current ability level. A totally de-conditioned beginner will need to scale the exercises as necessary.

When using the ladder, a raw beginner's first goal is to master doing three correct squats, two push-ups and one pull-up. Only then can they move on to the next rung on the ladder. Keep in mind that each repetition must be in good form in order to progress to the next rung. If the beginner's form breaks down, they go back to the first rung and start to work up the ladder again.

Learning Aids

Make the exercise easy to learn. It is very difficult to learn how to properly execute a pull-up, for instance, when you are barely able to do one. By using a rubber stretch-band (see accompanying photos) that de-weights their bodies, newbies are better able to focus on the mechanics, rather than just struggling to do it.

Rest periods are very important in learning. Learning a new movement, even without weight, is a strain on the nervous system. Finding your way to the proper form is fatiguing even if the exercise is not physically demanding. Allowing for rest time will help the nervous system process and organize information, helping a beginner learn faster.

Use the Ladder to Improve Conditioning— and as a WOD

Once the beginner has mastered the proper technique of the squat, push-up and pull-up, the ladder (see sidebar, below) may be used to improve conditioning. The goal is to start at the bottom of the ladder and work up the rungs. Once there is the slightest breakdown in form (remember perfect practice), the student returns to the bottom of the ladder (three squats) and begins to work up the ladder again. Most beginners are able to start at 10 minutes and work up to 20 minutes. Very de-conditioned people can rest more between the exercises. The ladder is effective because the relatively easier workload of the lower rungs helps the beginner complete a higher volume of training for longer periods of time. CrossFit SV beginners have made startling increases in total volume from each consecutive workout.

We prescribe the ladder as a phenomenal metabolic WOD if the athlete can complete all steps with decent form. Through assessment and qualification (the athlete must demonstrate refined movement), the athlete may move all the way up the ladder for time.

Again, the coach must qualify the movement to determine whether the exercise is appropriate relative to the ability of the athletes.



The BEGINNER'S LADDER

The system: Initially do the three-exercise routine outlined in each Rung for 10 minutes, increasing to 20 minutes as fitness develops. Don't skip a step. Move up to Rung 2 only once you can complete Rung 1, and so on. Stop and celebrate when you do a 20-minute workout on Rung 5; this is practically "Cindy" (Max rounds in 20 minutes of 5 pull-ups, 10 push-ups, 15 squats). The record for Cindy in our gym is 36 rounds, by Steve Ruel. He'll give Jason Khalipa a run for his money at next summer's CrossFit Games. A good number for most people to shoot for is 15 rounds.

Warning: Don't start doing it for time until you can do every rung on the ladder comfortably for a 20 minute time period.

Progression	Squats	Push-ups	Pull-ups
Rung 10	30	20	10
Rung 9	27	18	9
Rung 8	24	16	8
Rung 7	21	14	7
Rung 6	18	12	6
Rung 5	15	10	5
Rung 4	12	8	4
Rung 3	9	6	3
Rung 2	6	4	2
Rung 1	3	2	1

START

Change the Mix

For variety, change the three exercises. Instead of squats, push-ups, and pull-ups, coaches may prescribe basic movements or more advanced movements with varying weights, i.e., start with a broomstick or PVC pipe.

Here are a few triplets for more advanced ladders:

Squat / Shoulder Press / Deadlift

Front Squat / Push Press / Sumo Deadlift High Pull

Overhead Squat / Push Jerk / Medicine Ball Cleans

Kettlebell Swings / Pull-ups / Burpees

Conditioning Tips: Keep it easy and simple

Do not train to failure. Tell a beginner to stop one rep short of failure. Encourage beginners to work at a sustainable pace. The goal for beginners is not how hard they may push themselves but how much they are able to do in a given amount of time. You cannot increase your volume when you are puking into a bucket.

Perfect practice. Make sure every rep is performed properly.

Take it easy. Err on making the first few workouts too easy instead of too hard.

Exercise in the moment. Completely focus on what they are doing now.

Keep it simple. Sometimes focusing on doing a few things extremely well provides the greatest results.



Judd Xavier is the owner of [CrossFit Silicon Valley](#) and Tom Rankin is one of the gym's principal trainers.

