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How To Get A LOT More Out Of Your Pull-up Bar

Perhaps THE greatest tool for strength, shoulder and back health, and cutting down fat to uncover that lean, athletic body within you, is a pull-up bar. But NOT just for doing pull-ups.

Here is our simple strategy: look at which athletes have the least fat and most muscle – and do what they do as much as we are able.

ALL gymnasts are lean and muscular and generally healthy looking. There is something “built in” to bodyweight gymnastic training that conduces to being lean and muscular. So if we want to be lean and muscular, then do what gymnasts do knowing full well will not reach their level of master level skill. It is reasonable: they have grown up in the sport, have coaches, etc. and we do not. But we can still “borrow” from what they do on a more accessible level. You can still get lean, muscular, and pretty freaking strong doing the stuff they do on an easier scale.

Hanging rewards being lean. If you hang a lot -in the strategic way that I’ll share below- your body will get leaner by adapting to the new demands you will place on it. Adaptation is a survival mechanism the body does to make tasks demanded of it easier. If you have to walk a lot, your body will adapt and over time walking a lot is easier than when you started. If you play guitar, your fingers form calluses that harden the tips of your fingers to make playing the guitar easier. If you hang a lot in bad leveraged positions, your body will lean itself out to make it easier. I call this weight loss adaptation.

Diet plays a vital role and it becomes more important as we age. It compliments hanging and lifting for strength health. Strength training hits the “outside” and diet hits the “inside” for strength-health. It is outside the scope of this tutorial, but I want you to know that diet is essential for strength health. For a long time I thought I could lift more and more and eat and drink whatever I wanted and still be lean and healthy. That simply isn’t true. My personal results exploded when I combined the training I’m about to share with you and paying more attention to my veggies, and diet generally.

How to Do More Weighted and Unweighted Pull-Ups Without Doing Pull-Ups

You are here because you are interested in increasing your numbers in strict weighted and unweighted pull-ups, without doing pull-ups.

I want to share 3 strategies for accomplishing this. First, I want to address two mantras frequently said about pull-ups. 1.) “If you want to get better at pull-ups, then do pull-ups” and 2.) “a pull-up is a hanging plank.”

1.) Is true in a way, and not true in a way. In fact, I think it misses the most important thing about making your pull-up numbers go up fast: being comfortable with engaging your abs and lats in a hanging position.

By that I mean firing them is second nature and automatic, the opposite of jumping on a pull-up bar and trying to think about how to fire your abs and lats. If firing these muscles on the bar is a mystery to you, then you lack the base for easily increasing your numbers, both reps and increasing the heaviness of your pull-up. Doing more and more reps of pull-ups will be less effective. Muscle is obviously more essential for doing heavy pull-ups. View muscle as the base and adding reps as building off that base. Again, there is an order. Start with the base.

2.) Pull-ups are a plank, but I make a distinction in planks in the Simple Strength program that makes a huge difference for getting better at pull-ups easily.

The standard push-up plank that you probably already know of teaches a very important strength principle. Drop into a push-up plank and fire all your muscles as hard as you can: glutes, abs, pull knee caps up to fire quads, lats, etc. Pretend someone is walking around kicking you (or better yet have someone actually do it). The muscular exertion should be so great that you can only hold the effort for 10 seconds or less. This position is all about rigidity and rigidity is strength. This position has no movement so all the focus is on compression (another word for rigidity). Movement is by definition decompression, or space in the muscles/joints that allows for movement. If you are compressing all your joints and muscles as hard as you can, then you won't be able to move.

This is a true story. It is kind of goofy but gets the point across.

If you want to understand this in the clearest way possible, volunteer to get tased. A taser sends 50,000 volts into your muscles. I was dumb enough to try it at my local Citizen's Police Academy in early October, 2012. It is a violent way to lock up your muscles and understand that full compression is opposed to movement. You can't move when you are getting tased. The officers told stories of people on drugs and booze who withstand the 50,000 volt tase, but for sober folks it is not possible. If you are ever going to get hit really hard, being in locked tased position is as good a time as any. I think if someone would have swung a bat at my upper back, the bat might have broken before my back due

to the insane amount of (involuntary) tension in the muscles in my back. Words can't describe how that feels. The point is that compressed stuff doesn't break as easily, compressed stuff is strong – it withstands bigger outside forces working against it.

The problem with that plank, the push-up style plank off the floor is that you can be good at that, but not so good at pull-ups. The biggest obvious difference is that in a push-up plank, your lower body is connected to the ground and therefore you can compress your legs by pushing them against the ground. On a bar, you aren't connected to the ground, you are left "hanging." An essential point of contact and comfort has been removed.

So we have a problem. Planking is very important for understanding compression that is essential to strength through experiencing total compression or close to it, but a plank on the ground is essentially different from planking in the air because you are forfeiting one of your points of contact (your feet). This is a big deal.

What's the solution? The one I propose in Simple Strength is making the distinction of a long plank and a short plank (there's a third plank in Simple Strength that is outside the scope here).

I didn't figure this out by thinking about it. I discovered it by practice and unexpectedly getting stronger. "Short Planking" caused my pull-up and weighted pull-ups to explode – without doing any pull-ups and it cured my back problems and made my barbell deadlift stronger (and by extension all kettlebell ballistic exercises i.e. swing, snatch, clean and jerk. It worked way better than anything I had previously tried or heard about.

Why it worked made sense after I reflected on it. That reflection produced this system that I'll now share with you.

Here's the general outline:

1.) Elbows and Lats

2.) Short Planks

3.) Greasing the Groove (Program)

1.) Elbows and Lats

Let's go back to the plank. At the beginning of my pull-up journey I struggled big time. I could lift kettlebells like a mad man but jumped on the pull-up bar and could only do 2 UGLY pull-ups. Eventually I worked up to 3. One winter in MN, I trained push-ups inside where it was warm. After 3 weeks of doing push-ups (the right way that I describe below), I hopped on a pull-up bar and did 6 pull-ups, doubling my old record. During that three week period I did no pull-ups, only push-ups. This taught me that muscle is more important than practicing the movement, at least in the beginning stage.

I'm always a little "upset" when I get an advertisement that has someone doing push-ups incorrectly. They are wrong because their form weakens the shoulder joint.

A correct push-up is simple: keep your elbows IN and produce tension in your legs, glutes, and abs. Do not flare the elbows out haphazardly.

The strength test is always the same: if I set a 100 pound plate on your back, would you be able to withstand it or at least be able to fight against the load? Or would it cause permanent damage to your shoulder?

Big muscles are designed to take big loads. Keeping your elbows in will fire that big muscle: The Lat. It is that simple.

Here is the right and wrong way to it:

Wrong: elbows flared out to the side. Administer the heavy test. If a heavy weight were placed on your back or if you tried to do a one arm push-up, what would happen to your shoulders? What would happen to your plank?



Right: Elbows in. If someone put a heavy plate on my back my shoulders are safe because lats and pecs are firing protecting the shoulder. You can sit on the trunk of a tree but doing the same on a side branch will cause it to snap off. Make keeping your elbows in a habit of your normal posture and for all your strength exercises.



End of the pull-up: Elbows in once again, just like push-ups.



There are two reasons why doing push-ups the right way will make you stronger at pull-ups. The first is they load your lats and make your lats stronger (and abs from the stabilizing the lower back...lumbar spine), and second they teach proper elbow mechanics which will transfer to proper mechanics in a more unfamiliar position, hanging from a pull-up bar. Again, you want perfect strength habits BEFORE suspending yourself on the bar.

The ending position of a push-up and a pull-up are the same: bring your elbows into your iliac crest (the upper protruding hip bones) – or at least try to. Not every one has the same bone sizes so for some people that contact between the elbows and iliac crest isn't in the cards...but they should come as close as your body will allow and it should be your "intention."

Strong push-ups are a great exercise and you can do them absolutely anywhere except the bathroom in an airplane.

2.) Short Planking

Static "Short planking" as I like to describe it puts all the compression into your abs and lats, and keeps it there. Let's look at some pictures so we're on the same page:

The push-up “long plank”-legs, hips, and torso are loaded.



Next is the hanging “short plank.” Since the lower body isn’t loaded, the muscles stabilizing the spine – the abs and lats mostly – absorb the entire weight of your body. To increase the load on your torso, begin to straighten your legs (extend your hips). Fire your abs and lats hard to increase tension.



What’s the difference between the long and short plank as pictured? Obviously, one is in the air and the other is grounded. Look at where the load of my bodyweight is placed in the push-up plank: it is distributed throughout the entire body, with an emphasis on the middle part which is least supported (the point farthest away from the points of support, my feet and hands).

The short plank distributes the entire load onto the muscles stabilizing spine since the lower body and hips are not loaded. It is more “one sided.”

This short plank position is gold for drastically increasing strength in all areas and for spine health. Your shoulders are automatically “packed” – the supporting lats and pecs are firing to protect the shoulders. You can’t avoid firing your lats in this position. It is impossible and therefore a great teacher. Your lats are stabilizing your upper back and shoulders. Your shoulders will feel so good from doing these. Your abs are going nuts to stabilize your lower spine in this poorly leveraged position. So get in this position and intentionally “fire” your abs and lats extra hard. Hold it for 4 seconds less than failure.

The key to bodyweight strength is to continually worsen your leverage to make things “heavier” on your muscles. The “front lever” which is the short plank position above with hips extended, legs straight, is terrible leverage – even really strong lean people can’t do it – if you are carrying around extra pounds it will never happen. The front lever is the great “eliminator.” Here’s gymnast John Gill doing one in 1962:



Practicing the “short plank” as I describe it will make your long plank much stronger, but not the other way around.

A guy I know who’s trained on the bar for 10 years who is fairly ripped and one strong hombre told me he can hold the “front lever” position for only 1 second on a good day. That is how hard it is. For real gymnasts who have grown up in the sport and have excellent coaches, and are usually short (the average size for a male gymnast in the U.S. is 5’4” it is considered easy, it is rated “A” which is entry level).

3.) Grease the Groove

You may have heard the common phrase: “If you want to get better at pull-ups, do pull-ups as frequently as possible, as fresh as possible.” I agree with this, but only after you’ve done 1.) elbows and lats and 2.) short planks that are discussed above. Once you’ve developed the proper muscles (abs and lats) and fire them habitually and automatically when you are doing pull-ups, and you own the mechanics of bringing your elbows into your iliac crest or close to it, THEN fire off some pull-up practice. In fact, you can increase your numbers without doing ANY pull-ups. I mostly practice the short plank position and the last I tested my pull-ups went from 11 (back in the day when I did pull-ups all the time) to 15 without doing pull-up practice in almost a year. The same

scenario caused my weighted pull-ups to go from 35 pounds added for 3 reps to 70 pounds added for 1 rep. Muscle and proper mechanics comes before practicing the movement. I know that now if I choose to ramp up numbers I have a firm foundation to work off of and “greasing the groove” by practicing the precise movement itself will yield much greater results.

I can't say it enough: build a base of muscle and mechanics before anything else.

To think of it abstractly: a system with a lot of moving parts breaks more easily. A compressed system, a static system doesn't. A slow moving system is one where the muscles can do their work. It is interesting that an Olympic lifter starts his/her lift slowly, or as Pavel says “like a space shuttle launch.” The low gear always precedes the high gear – the Olympic lifter has built a base of strength of muscle that he or she uses to increase the poundage on explosive lifts.

Can you do a really slow push up and pull-up under full control with ZERO momentum?

Here is the order of strength: Static – slow moving – fast moving. Short Planks – slow pushups emphasizing lat – pull-ups. Muscle – movement.

If you watch MMA, when a guy is getting violently attacked, he compresses into a ball, he doesn't extend his limbs outward. He “shortens” himself. When life gets really hard we want to curl up in the fetal position. The MMA guy will fortify and strengthens himself defensively with little to no movement to absorb the attack, and then regroups and hopefully plans an offensive attack on his opponent who is more fatigued after all the kicking and punching and movement which has taken away his energy. It is generally the same thing with this pull-up system: compress first and then add movement.

So here is your program for increasing your weighted and unweighted pull-ups:

5 days a week:

Do 3 sets, move from 1 to 2 to 3 as described. Take a minute or two after each exercise to refresh and recover and shake off the tension. The intention is strength and not getting fatigued, so be fresh for each set and each exercise:

1.) Hanging short planks 4 seconds short of failure with intense firing of abs and lats – keeping your spine close to parallel to the ground.

2.) Slow push-ups as taught in the push-up section: 3 seconds down, 2 seconds at bottom, 3 seconds up, 2 seconds at top for 2 reps less than failure. ELBOWS IN, LATS FIRING, ABS STABILIZING SPINE, GLUTES FIRING, HIPS LOCKED, KNEE CAPS PULLED UP TO FIRE QUADS, CALVES FIRING (If you can already do a couple of pull-ups proceed to step 3 below, if not, end here).

3.) Pull-ups (ELBOWS IN), but stop 2 reps before your form/muscles begin to fail on you. Do them as fast as you can and as high as you can. Don't struggle with ANY reps – as soon as you start slowing down and have to “fight” – even a little – then stop.

Do this for four weeks, exactly the same. **But on the third week, however, drop down to only 2 sets a day and on the fourth week come back to 3.** Take a few days off and then test your weighted and unweighted pull-ups and contact me, sean@strengthproductionsllc.com, with your progress and also what you are struggling with because I want to help you get stronger and leaner, or as I call it “strength health.”



All the best in your training and strength health!
–Sean Schniederjan
President, Strength Productions LLC

PS. I want to stress how important that short plank position is. I can't believe I'm typing this, but the other day I did a pull-up with a 70 pound kettlebell around my waste. Before I discovered the short plank, I did pull-ups almost every day “grease the groove” style and could do 2 reps with 35 pounds added. I tried the 53 pound kettlebell and failed several times, I could never do it. Now, I NEVER do weighted pull-ups, and even very few pull-ups these days. The short plank and its different varieties are a huge part of my training and my back and shoulders feel great.

“Yeah, but you've lost weight, so the added weight to the pull-ups isn't that much stronger,” you might argue. “You're right,” I would respond. “25 pounds lighter to be exact.” Hanging forces your body to get leaner while you get stronger. Use it to your advantage.

