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The Russian's Gymnastics Warm-Up

Many CrossFitters struggle with gymnastics movements, so Leo Soubbotine has developed a warm-up program designed to put you on the path to muscle-ups, handstand push-ups and beyond.

Leo Soubbotine

All images courtesy of Leo Soubbotine/CrossFit Evolution



Tuck planche—This movement is the same as the advanced frog stand, but now the knees are not supported by the elbows. Do not touch the arms with the knees. This is dramatically harder than the advanced frog stand.

The need for a different warm-up arose at [CrossFit Evolution](#) about a year ago. Until then, the default daily drill was 3x10 of the CrossFit Warm-Up, skill practice/movement preparation and then the WOD.

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Tuck L-hang—Hang on the bar with your knees level with your hips and your heels directly under your knees.

The CrossFit Warm-Up is a great tool for strength development and greasing the groove on most of the key bodyweight movements: dips, pull-ups, GHD sit-ups and overhead squats. The only con is that for a lot of people—myself included—it's quite boring to do the same routine over and over five or six days a week till death do us part.

With that, the first variation of our [CrossFit Evolution warm-up](#) arose. We used it for about half a year, and it was fun. It also worked, but it lacked the progression and periodization needed to elicit the strength and performance gains the CrossFit Warm-Up is capable of producing.

Build Competency—and Strength

The idea of a gymnastics warm-up has been stuck in my head for a long time. And because I'm a "born gymnast"—6'4" and over 200 lb.—and in love with all things gymnastics, the natural way was to figure out the details, test the program on myself and then apply it in the gym to see if it could work.

Great help in understanding and systemization of knowledge was provided by Coach Christopher Sommer's *Building the Gymnastic Body* book and all the original *CrossFit Journal* articles by Coach Glassman and Roger Harrell. If you haven't gone into back catalog of CrossFit.com and haven't seen pics of levers, "elevators" and so on, look back into the 2003-05 archives. It's nostalgic to see Annie Sakamoto getting her first muscle-up and Greg Amundson crushing WODs, plus you'll learn a lot.

To structure a gymnastics warm-up, the essential part was to keep the challenging pieces that will improve us as CrossFitters yet would not need an hour to be introduced to each athlete. We need to keep it simple because it's still a warm-up and not a real gymnastics training regimen. Strength work went in, and the majority of the dynamic work went out.

Based on my observations and the general strengths, weaknesses and goals of my athletes, more emphasis was put onto upper-body work and less on the lower body. Generally, CrossFit WODs are quite lower-body oriented, and most beginners (especially ladies) desperately lack the ability to perform pull-ups and dips, while more advanced guys aspire to perform dead-hang muscle-ups, levers, free-standing handstand push-ups and planches.

To keep us out of trouble with training ADD and OCD, variety is minimized for everyone except the advanced folks capable of HSPU, dead-hang muscle-ups and pistols. Getting to such a level requires dedication, patience and self-control, so for them there will be choices of exercises that will rotate depending on each athlete's aspirations.

Let me emphasize that this is not the end-all, be-all warm-up but rather a template containing some food for thought. Modify it based on your needs, space, equipment and athletic or coaching skills.

The purpose of the warm-up is to develop basic body-weight competency for beginner athletes while improving flexibility and strength. For the more advanced athletes, the purpose is to keep them focused and excited while they master the simpler gymnastics movements and start delving into the realm of more advanced gymnastics strength.

Another reason for the warm-up is the fact that development in gymnastics comes from constant and consistent practice. Take a handstand: past a certain competency it does not need to be coached all the time, but to develop it to the point of being able to walk 50-100 feet and hold it strict and hollow for any amount of time, the athlete has to inevitably spend a lot of time on his or her hands. This is similar to the way the snatch is better developed by daily practice of the Burgener Warm-Up and not by a once-a-month one-hour snatch extravaganza.

Athletes are separated into four levels, each with its own set of exercises and progressions geared toward achievement of more and more challenging goals. Most goals, however, are written with CrossFit performance in mind, so do not mistake this as a program of pure gymnastics training.



Tripod—Put your hands down by the mat (head slightly in front of the hands) and get the knees on the elbows. Press hands into the ground to prevent all load being held by the head and neck.

The warm-up consists of Day 1 and Day 2 programming for each level, to be alternated each training day. Someone training twice a week might do Day 1 on Tuesday and Day 2 on Thursday, while someone training four times a week might alternate Day 1 and 2 from Monday to Thursday. If an athlete ends the week on Day 1, the next rotation should start with Day 2.

Each day's programming will be based on exercises appropriate to the level of athlete and will follow this pattern:

Day 1: upper-body pressing (A) and lower-body (B).

Day 2: upper-body pulling (A) and core/low back (B).

Each day will have a Part A and a Part B. A is to be done first, and both parts are done in a super-set fashion with small breaks of 20-30 seconds in between exercises. The difficulty of the exercises should be sufficient to elicit progress yet light enough to allow movement from one to another in a timely fashion. The entire warm-up should last 15-20 minutes—an extremely important time frame for an affiliate).

Each athlete will have a level based on performance. Athletes of any level must be able to complete all requirements of the levels below.

Levels and Requirements	
Basic	No requirements. Everyone can start here.
Intermediate Minus	3 dead-hang pull-ups, handstand (against a wall), 3 ring dips, overhead squat x 15 reps (45/33 lb. for men and women, respectively).
Intermediate	1 muscle-up (kipping, partial ROM), partial HSPU (against a wall).
Advanced	1 muscle-up (dead-hang, full ROM), HSPU (full ROM, against a wall), pistol.



Butterfly kip—Watch the [Butterfly Kip Tutorial](#) on YouTube for instructions.



Overhead squat—Use PVC or training/women's/men's bar.
Push your knees out the entire time during descent and ascent. Lock the elbows hard.

Athletes can only advance to the next level when all the requirements are completed. If there's only one requirement left to allow movement to the next level, it's that much more of a reason to emphasize it and complete it. Once there's only one thing left to complete, more time can be allotted to practicing that element. If you can easily do all requirements for one level but fail to qualify for the next level, continue at the current level of ability while focusing on the weakness until it's no longer a weakness.

Remember: this is still a warm-up—a practice of all the various CrossFit gymnastics movements—not a workout. Best results will be yielded by keeping intensity low, breaks short and consistency high. After the warm-up you should be energized and ready to hit the WOD, not drenched in sweat, tired and ready to go home. Keep form excellent and reps perfect.

Because it's a warm-up, we will not use the standard protocol of adjusting difficulty in the middle as the exercises become easier, which will allow us to avoid overtraining and fatigue. The exercises will be chosen to be moderately difficult, and the athlete has to stick with them with no modifications until they're easy (generally 4-6 weeks).

Example: an Intermediate athlete can perform 5 sets of 3 reps of a given movement with 35 lb. For the warm-up, such an athlete should use 15-20 lb., which will not be impossible and will not leave him drained. After 4-6 weeks—depending on progress—the weight can be increased.

To keep OCD and ADD in check, no exercise should be adjusted in difficulty/weight in less than four weeks.

If you start developing any overuse injuries, such as joint pain, aches and soreness, look closely at your diet. Have you introduced new foods that are causing inflammation, or are you falling off the Paleo wagon and blaming training for pains/aches instead of improving your diet? If the diet is impeccable and soreness remains, lay off the exercises that aggravate the tender spot for 7-14 days. If you're starting to feel like not training or doing the warm-up, or if you're dragging in general and your diet is impeccable, you're overreaching (a mild case of overtraining) and should take 4-6 days off training completely.

What follows is the complete prescription of exercises for all levels. If you have questions, concerns or a success story, e-mail me at leo@crossfitevolution.com.

BASIC	INTERMEDIATE MINUS
Goals: Improvement in CrossFit, development of basic proficiency with body-weight exercises, development of necessary upper-body strength and lower-body flexibility/strength.	Goals: Reaching the Intermediate level.
DAY 1	DAY 1
Upper-body pressing	Upper-body pressing
5 sets of: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Kick up to handstand x 3 attempts2. Ring push-ups x 53. Tripod/frog stand x 10 seconds	5 sets of: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. HSPU x 5 reps2. Frog stand x 10 seconds
Legs	Legs
3 sets of: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Overhead squats x 10 reps (men's/women's bar, training Bar, PVC)2. Kettlebell deadlifts x 10 reps (24/16 kg)	3 sets of: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Pistols x 5 (each leg)2. Hip extensions x 10 reps
<i>Notes: Kicking up to the handstand may result in a handstand. If not, try kicking up harder and harder every session while keeping the elbows locked out and the head between the hands. To make ring push-ups easier, move the rings forward of perpendicular to the floor, ensuring the angle you create makes the exercise moderately challenging yet not impossible. The tripod is a basic handstand with knees resting on the elbows. In case of a prior neck injury, skip this step altogether. If the tripod is too easy, perform a frog stand.</i>	<i>Notes: Handstand push-ups can be partial range of motion, and pistols may be done to a box. As you're coming out of the bottom position of a pistol, raise the chest at the same time as you extend the hip. Hip extensions are done on a GHD with the low back never rounding.</i>
DAY 2	DAY 2
Upper-body pulling	Upper-body pulling
5 sets of: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Kip attempts x 32. Dead-hang pull-ups x 5 (band assisted if necessary)	3 sets of: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Dead-hang pull-ups x 5 (add weight if necessary)2. Muscle-up rows x 33. Bonus: kip x 3 (if learning the butterfly kip)
Core/Low Back	Core/Low Back
3 sets of: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Tuck L-sit on the rings x 10 seconds2. Kettlebell swings x 10 (16/12 kg)	3 sets of: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Tuck L-sit on the rings x 10 seconds2. Back extensions x 10 reps
<i>Notes: Kip attempts will take the athlete as high as possible, and height will be minimal if the athlete isn't strong enough. Expect nose-to-bar/chin-to-bar if the athlete is well along in developing the pull-up, chest-to-bar/belly-button-to-bar if the athlete should be at the next level but isn't for whatever reason. Perform the tuck L-hang to the best of the trainee's ability. Ultimately, the knees should be level with hips. If not, keep training till it's possible.</i>	<i>Notes: For tuck L-sit on the rings, work on strict support (no bent elbows). After that, make sure to bring the knees level with the hips. Turn the rings out during support if you're strong enough.</i>

INTERMEDIATE

Goals: Moving toward being able to do all CrossFit WODs as RX'd.

DAY 1

Upper-body pressing

5 sets of:

1. HSPU x 5 reps
2. Frog stand x 10 seconds

Legs

3 sets of:

1. Pistols x 5 (each leg)
2. Back and hip extensions x 5 (a.k.a. "The Snake")

Notes: Partial ROM on HSPU is acceptable. Pistols are done to a box.

DAY 2

Upper-body pulling

5 sets of:

1. Dead-hang weighted pull-ups x 3
2. Muscle-up rows x 2 (full turnout at the start)
3. Bonus: Kip x 3 (if learning the butterfly kip)

Core/low back

3 sets of:

1. Tuck L-sit on the rings x 10 seconds
2. Tuck/straddle press to headstands x 3

Notes: Maintain straight elbows at the beginning of the muscle-up row. For the tuck L-sit on the rings, work on strict support (no bent elbows). Only after that can be achieved should you make sure to bring the knees level with the hips. Turn the rings out during support if strong enough. Use mats for the press to headstands, and swap for back extensions/kettlebell swings (x 10 each) if the athlete has neck issues.

ADVANCED

Goals: Polishing all the CrossFit skills and further advancing into the world of gymnastics (mainly the strength elements) such as wide-grip muscle-ups and L-sit muscle-ups, levers, planches and presses to handstand, weighed pistols, etc.

DAY 1

Upper-body Pressing

5 sets of:

1. Headstand push-ups x 3
2. Advanced frog stand/tuck planche x 10-12 seconds

Legs

3 sets of:

1. Pistols x 5 (each leg, add weight if necessary)
2. Glute-ham raises x 5

Notes: Headstand push-ups: from a headstand on a stack of mats, press to a handstand, then try to maintain balance and lower back down. Once able to consistently complete all 5 sets of 3 reps without losing balance, lower the stack. Keep going until you can do headstand push-ups from the ground, then move to parallettes to develop full range-of-motion free handstand push-ups. On advanced frog stands/planches, the elbows must always be straight. Raise the chest at the same time as you extend the hips on pistols. Do GHRs slowly, adding weight if necessary.

DAY 2

Upper-body pulling

5 sets of:

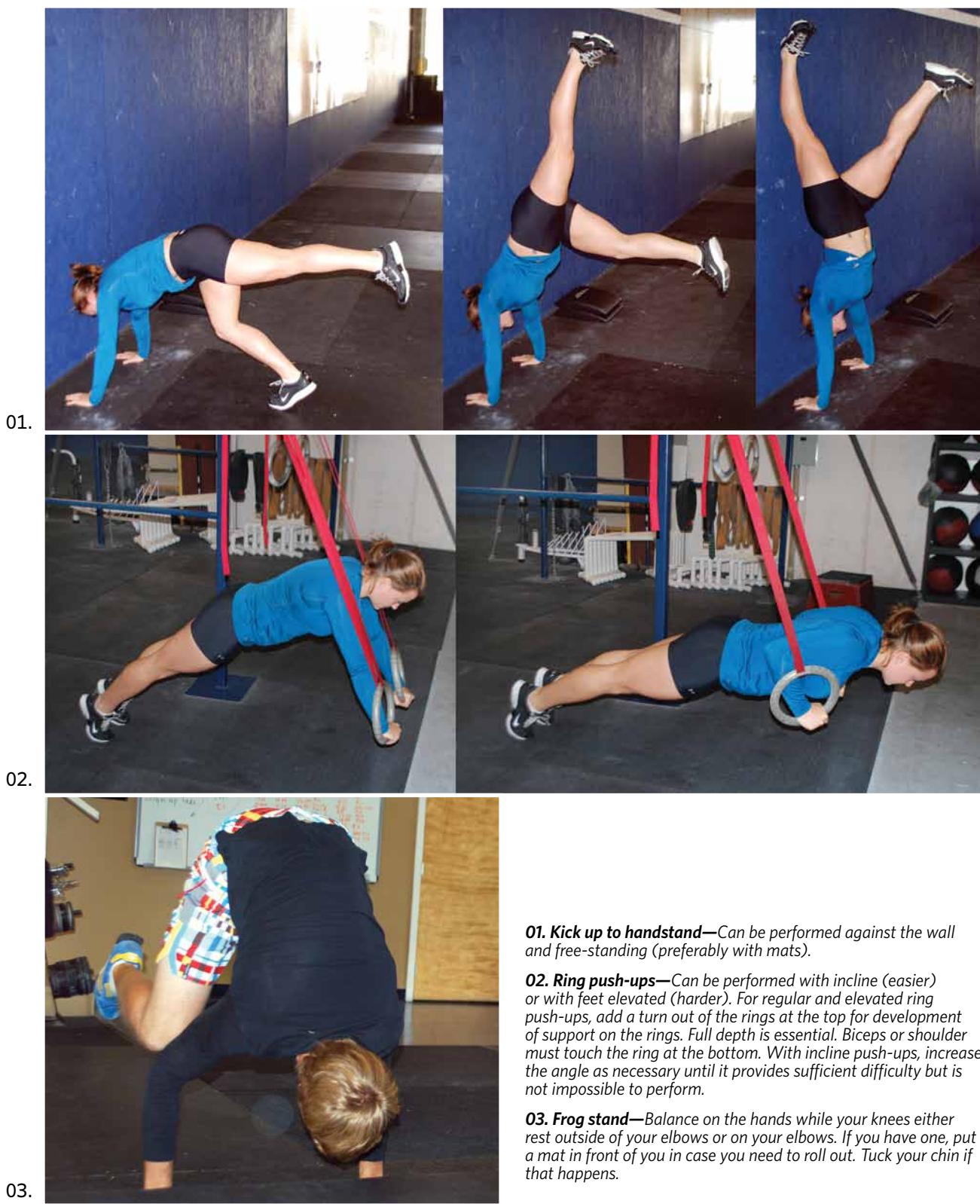
1. L pull-up variation x 3-5
2. Wide-grip muscle-up rows x 2 (swap with butterfly kip practice if unable to butterfly kip)
3. Tuck back lever/advanced tuck back lever x 10 seconds

Core/Low Back

3 sets of:

1. L-sit on parallettes/straddle low L-sit on parallettes x 10 seconds
2. Reverse leg lift headstands/reverse leg lift wall handstands x 3

Notes: L pull-ups can be done with an underhand or overhand grip in a tuck or regular L-sit. Once butterfly kipping is learned, move on to developing the wide-grip muscle-up. If hip/hamstring flexibility is an issue, do straddle L-sits to help develop it. Choose the difficulty of the reverse leg lift based on level of ability (bent leg, straddle or straight leg).



01. Kick up to handstand—Can be performed against the wall and free-standing (preferably with mats).

02. Ring push-ups—Can be performed with incline (easier) or with feet elevated (harder). For regular and elevated ring push-ups, add a turn out of the rings at the top for development of support on the rings. Full depth is essential. Biceps or shoulder must touch the ring at the bottom. With incline push-ups, increase the angle as necessary until it provides sufficient difficulty but is not impossible to perform.

03. Frog stand—Balance on the hands while your knees either rest outside of your elbows or on your elbows. If you have one, put a mat in front of you in case you need to roll out. Tuck your chin if that happens.

04.



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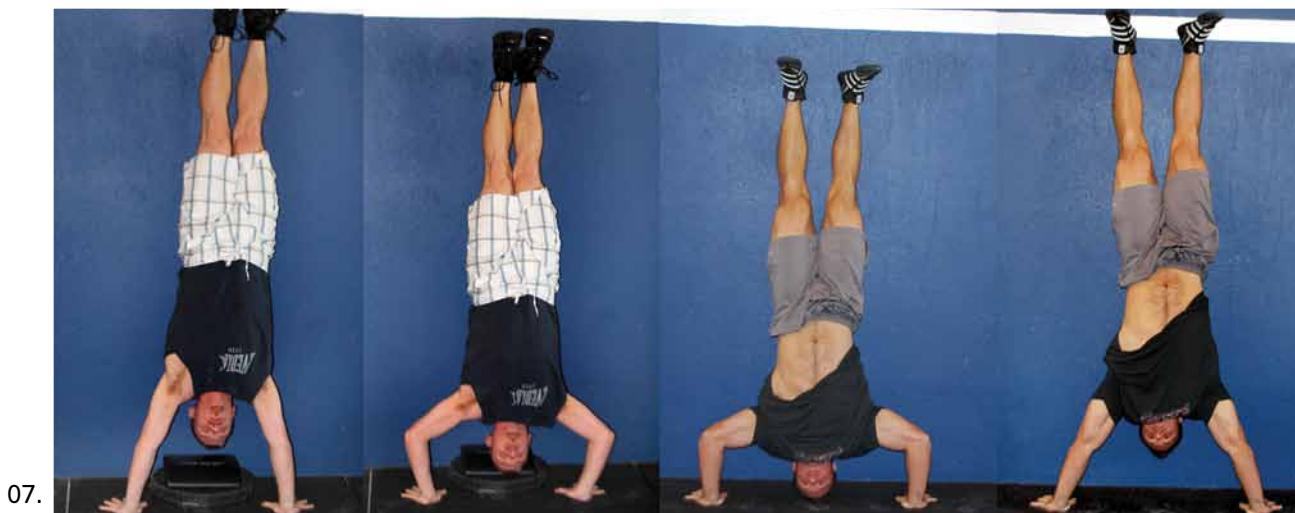
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04. Kip attempt—Hang on the bar. Swing forward and back and pull up as high as you can. Do not perform more than one swing total. Get only as high as the kip will take you, and do not finish off with a slow pull-up. You might only be able to come up a few inches or get your chest to the bar.

05. Kettlebell deadlift—Stand tall, push your hips back hard and slightly bend your knees. Push your knees apart, and keep driving the hips back till the kettlebell touches the floor. Keep your chest up the entire time, but ensure that you're mostly bending over (a hard stretch in hamstrings is a sign of doing it right) and not squatting.

06. Dead-hang pull-up—With a double overhand grip, the chin must clearly come up over the bar (preferably the throat or chest should make contact with the bar). Use a band if necessary (pictured).



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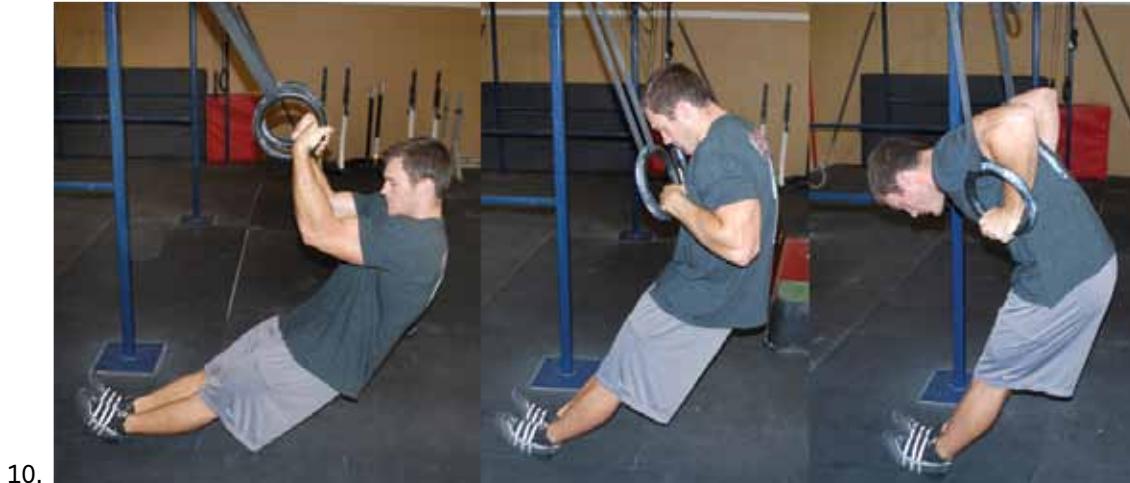


09.

07. Handstand push-up—Leaning against the wall, lower to the ground till the crown of the head touches the floor, then press back up. Use a stack of AbMats or 10-lb. bumper plates and an AbMat to make the exercise easier, or use parallettes to make it more challenging.

08. Pistol—Extend your hands out, bring one leg in front (keep both leg and arms straight). Push your hips back and squat down to a box. Touch the box and get up right away. Raise the chest at the same rate as you extend the hips when rising. Fix your eyes on an object in front of you to better maintain balance.

09. Kettlebell swing—Maintain a hard arch in the low back and push your knees apart at the bottom. At the top, push your head through and lock the knees and hips.



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10. Muscle-up row (bent arms)—With your heels on the ground in front of you, hang from the rings with a false grip, bent arms and straight legs. Pull yourself very slowly toward the rings while keeping the body hollow and looking at the toes. Once the thumbs touch the chest, start rolling your shoulders on top of the rings, leaving the hips behind (to counterbalance and keep the tension). Finish in a low dip. Do not roll onto toes or raise your chest. At no time should you raise your hips, bend the legs or speed up. This is a hard movement to perform correctly, and [this video](#) may help.

11. Muscle-up row (straight arms)—This movement is the same as the bent-arm version but with a turn-out at the start. Maintain the false grip during the turn-out.

12. Hip extension—Set up a GHD so the pad will be on the top of your quads. Keeping your chest up and back arched, lower as far as possible while maintaining an arched back. Come back up. Your hamstrings will feel an intense stretch at the bottom.



13. Back extension—Set up the GHD pad on your hip flexors. With your body held parallel to the floor and your back arched, tuck your chin and round your back one vertebrae at a time until you're all the way down. Return back by extending the spine one vertebrae at a time.

14. Hip and back extension—Set up the GHD pad the same as for hip extension (on your quads). With your body held parallel to the floor and your back arched, tuck your chin and round your back one vertebrae at a time until you're all the way down. At the bottom, arch your back while keeping your torso close to the vertical beam of the GHD. After that, round your back again and return to the top by extending the spine one vertebrae at a time.

15. Tuck L on the rings—Make sure the elbows are locked out completely, then bring your knees up. Sacrifice how high you raise the knees if your elbows are bending in support. As the support develops, bring the rings parallel and eventually turn them out. That will make the exercise harder by leaps and bounds.



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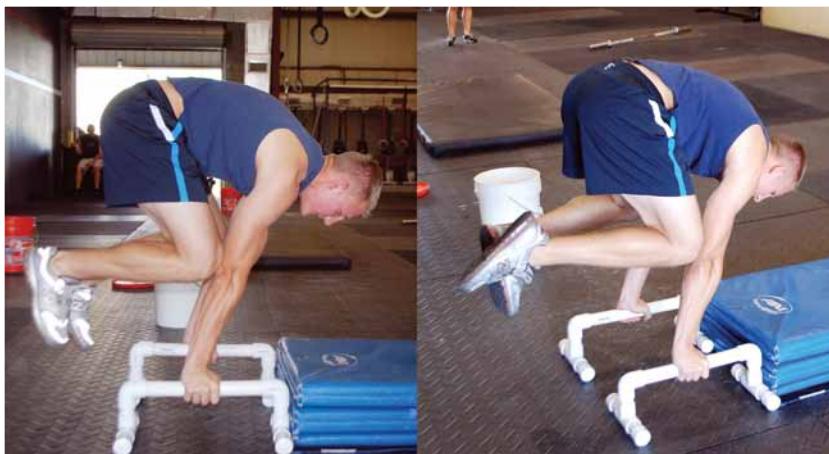


18.

16. Tuck press to headstand—Start in a tripod. Lift your knees off the elbows and extend all the way to a headstand. If you lose your balance, roll out, set up again and finish the reps.

17. Straddle press to headstand—Keep the legs straight the entire time. Point your toes (which will help keeping the legs straight). Do not push off your toes.

18. Headstand push-ups—From a headstand, press out to handstand. If your balance is good, lower back down and repeat. If you lose the handstand forward, roll out, reset the headstand and finish the reps.



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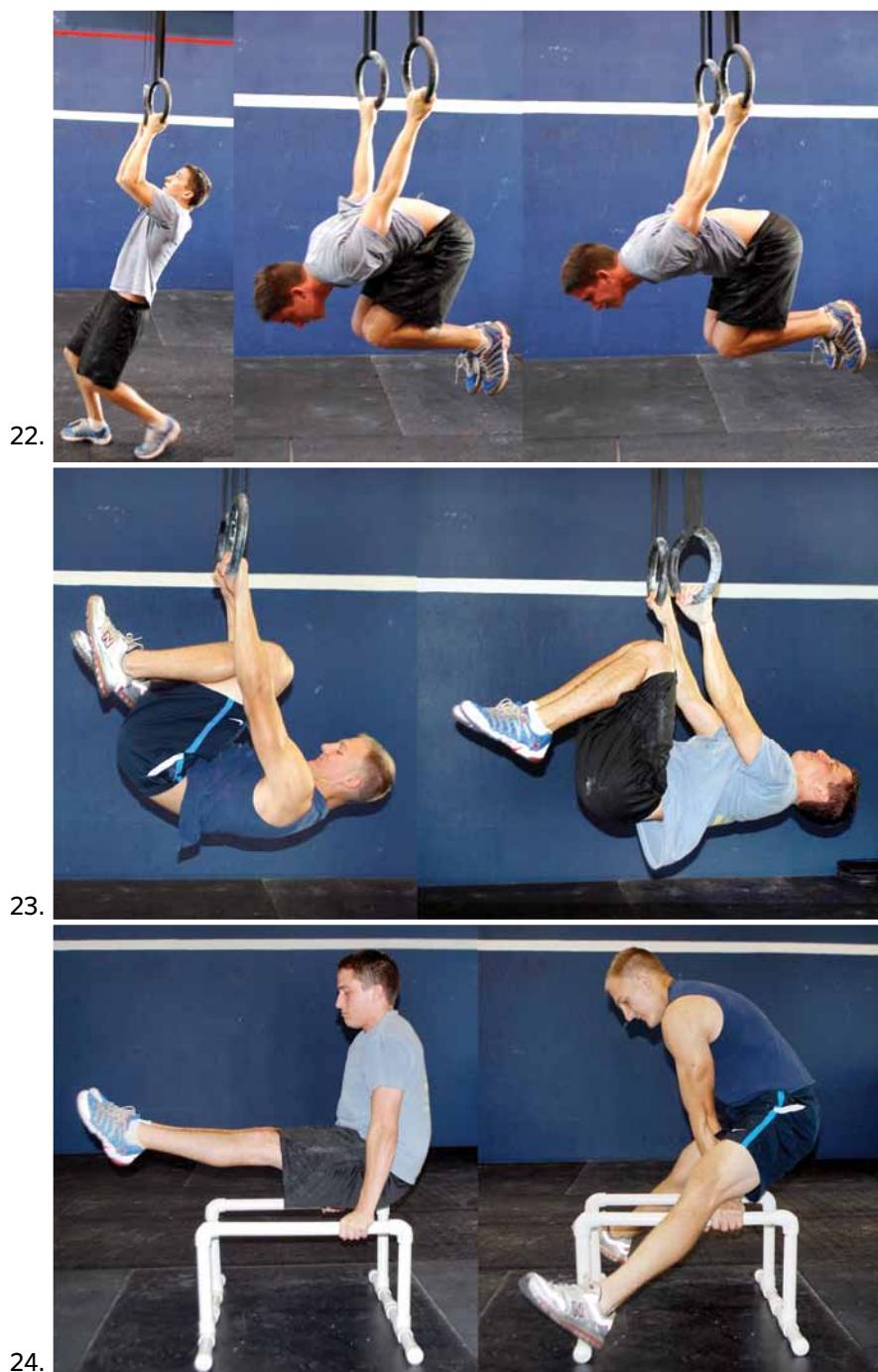


21.

19. Advanced frog stand—Rest the knees on the elbows. Make sure that the elbows are perfectly straight, and balance on your hands. Pointing your toes will add to tightness. Use parallettes if necessary to alleviate some of the wrist strain.

20. Glute-ham raise (GHR)—The set-up is the same as for hip extension. Lower to the bottom position. As you come up and hit the straight-body position, dig the knees in and raise the rest of the body. Squeeze your glutes hard to prevent bending of the hips. In the beginning some momentum can be used to pass through the sticking point. Eventually, perform GHRs slowly and under control. Add weight if necessary.

21. L pull-up—Choose appropriate level of difficulty: tuck pull-ups, tuck chin-ups, L chin-ups and L pull-ups are all great exercises. Touch throat or chest on the bar, with full extension at the bottom. Do not let your knees or feet come below hips. Keep legs parallel to the ground.



22. Back lever—Choose an appropriate level of difficulty. Start with palms facing in and your feet on the floor. Pull to an inverted hang. Keep your hands straight and lower the hips till they're level with your shoulders. Variations: tuck (pictured), advanced tuck (flat back, also pictured), straddle, half, full.

23. Front lever—Choose appropriate level of difficulty. Start in an inverted hang with palms facing out. Keep your hands straight, and lower the hips till they're level with your shoulders. Variations: tuck (pictured), advanced tuck (flat back, also pictured), straddle, half, full.

24. L-sit—Choose between regular L-sit and straddle low L-sit. Bend your legs in the beginning. If necessary, bend your legs in the beginning to avoid cramping. Straighten them as you progress.

24.



25.



24. Reverse leg lift wall handstand—Lean against the wall in a handstand with fingers pointed away from the wall. Lower your legs in a tuck, straddle or straight position. Touch the ground (or knees on elbows for tuck), reverse, and return back to wall handstand. This is a preparatory movement for press to handstand. Use a mat if possible.

25. Reverse leg lift headstand—Start in a headstand with your head elevated on a mat. Perform either from a tuck, straddle or straight-leg position. Slowly lift your legs up off the floor and finish in a headstand. Slowly lower and repeat. If you perform a straddle or straight-leg variations, do not bend your legs at any point. Do not push off your toes.

General Notes: Every 4-8 weeks, the exercises for Advanced athletes can be switched around based on the level of ability/progress/needs. Muscle-up rows can be swapped with front lever pulls (tucked, straddle, etc.). L-sits can be swapped to straddle L-sits and back with progressively harder variations (floor, rings). Headstand push-ups can be taken to parallettes/stacks of plates to develop more strength if balance is well developed (the athlete is able to do headstand push-ups to the floor). Pistols can be swapped with weighted-vest deck squats. Athletes can also start developing the one-arm pull-up.



About the Author

Leonid (The Russian) Soubbotine is married to Monique Ames, and together they own CrossFit Evolution in Longwood, Fla. Leo lives and breathes World Class Fitness in 100 Words by Greg Glassman and has found many CrossFitters miss Coach's recommendation to "master the basics of gymnastics." Leo qualified for the CrossFit Games last year at the Dirty South Regional. He's been doing "real CrossFit" for about 2.5 years, plus another year of what he thought was CrossFit. Leo moved to the United States five years ago at the age of 20 and has so far found that it is indeed a country of opportunity.