

the
CrossFit
JOURNAL ARTICLES

The Kipping Pull-up

Greg Glassman



Every manner of pull-up has its diehard fans. Wide and narrow grip, single and double suspension points, wide handle, rotating bar, slow, and behind the head all have their staunch supporters.

The default CrossFit pull-up, however - a violent, kipping, “anyhow” pull-up - has few supporters even among pull-up connoisseurs. Ours has always been the “cheating” pull-up.

Kipping comes in a myriad of styles, and each athlete has a signature kip, but in its most elegant form the kip is a transference of movement first generated in the horizontal plane, where it comes cheap and easy, to the vertical plane, where momentum and a perfectly timed pull from the back launch the athlete forcefully upward.

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The Kipping Pull-up (continued...)

This “cheat” derives from a powerful and athletic reversal of hip direction – like that of the clean and the snatch – and expands the primary movers from just the back and arms down through the torso and hip to include the power zone. Far from being a cheat, kipping is a gateway skill with functional utility on the rings, parallel bars, high bar, and floor (the quickest way to get to your feet). Where most athletic communities avoid the kip, we go to great lengths to teach and learn it.

The dynamism and athleticism of CrossFit training is often confusing and frequently alarming to would-be athletes whose experience has been limited to pop fitness and its near complete reliance on bodybuilding exercises. An Australian trainer for an America’s Cup sailing team reported back to his team after visiting CrossFit HQ last year that “CrossFit athletes and trainers use poor form. They even use their legs on their military press,” apparently ignorant of the push-press.

Kipping is whole-body, athletic, and demands coordination and agility. It is plyometric, requires flexibility of the shoulders, allows for rapid cycle time, and in totality represents an essential, unique, and powerful core to extremity motor recruitment pattern. None of which could be said of the strict pull-up.

For any given athlete, every manner of pull-up requires the same amount of mechanical work to perform. The kipping pull-up is faster than the strict pull-up and therefore elicits more power from the athlete. The kipping pull-up makes a contribution to workouts of super-high average power that the other pull-ups cannot.

In a pull-up-intensive CrossFit workout such as “Fran” or “Helen,” strict pull-ups would substantially increase the time to completion. We’d be doing the same amount of work in more time. The same amount of work in more time is a reduction in average power. Power is intensity. We’d have reduced the intensity of the workout.



The Kipping Pull-up (continued...)

We would not expect to reduce the intensity of a workout without blunting the majority of adaptations possibly and desirably derived through the effort. Strict pull-ups would likely reduce the fitness of CrossFitters if they were to supplant our kipping pull-ups.

What is so far known about neuroendocrine response suggests to us that the kipping pull-up contributes substantially to a change in hormonal milieu that potentially promotes athletic development. It would be hard to make the same claim for the slower, less powerful, strict pull-up.

To argue the value of strict pull-ups as a focused exercise that dramatically increases upper-body pulling strength is sound, but much of that need can be addressed with “L” pull-ups (the cleanest pull-up of all), rope climbs, the Bachar ladder, cargo nets, and our rotating thick handled pull-up bar. Wonderful pulling exercises each, and none amenable to kipping.

We have not found that communities of non-kippers are capable of performing more strict pull-ups than CrossFitters, and we have found that our athletes’ rankings for pull-ups do not change appreciably testing with different pull-up types. Fourth place kipping seems to be fourth place strict, slow, or wide.

Revealingly, seeing non-kippers compete against our athletes has been the easiest way to demonstrate the

strengths of the kip. Advocates of the strict pull-up have found the superiority of their method impossible to defend in person. The debate is largely an Internet phenomenon.

We teach the kip from the hang by having the athlete push his hips and shoulders forward and then relax, push forward and then relax, until a swing develops. The athlete moves from “arched to hollow” forming a “C” alternating between belly forward, shoulder open (arched), and belly retreating, shoulder closing (hollow).

Once the swing is developed, the athlete will find the kip by giving a sharp tug upward at the back of the swing while leaning back slightly, which heaves the athlete toward the bar in a beautiful arc.

Starting from the top of the pullup and hurtling yourself downward as Christopher Sommer teaches <http://www.crossfit.com/discus/messages/20/4098.html> is appropriate for teaching the kipping movement to 60-pound children on a super flexible horizontal bar, not a 200-pound SEAL on two feet of galvanized pipe.

Kipping pull-ups have the same advantages over strict pull-ups that the jerk has over the shoulder press. Each is a fundamentally more potent stimulus than its less dynamic, less powerful counterpart. Our program’s extensive reliance on the more dynamic, powerful movements holds the seeds of our athletes’ successes.

Links

CrossFit Forum – kipping is essential:

<http://www.crossfit.com/discus/messages/22/4926.html>

<http://www.crossfit.com/discus/messages/20/4319.html>

Dragon Door – swinging weights is OK, but not the body:

<http://forum.dragondoor.com/training/message/326530/>

<http://forum.dragondoor.com/training/message/318350/>



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