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## Can Bodyweight Calisthenics Make You Stronger?

by Matt Furey

From the time I was 13 years old I have been keenly interested in learning the best ways to get in condition for sports. At that time I began training three days a week on the weights, using only one exercise, the clean and push press. In six weeks I noted some amazing changes in my physical appearance. And the new muscle helped me perform better in the sports I was involved in: football, wrestling and swimming.

A year later, though, I began to train differently. After reading a number of books on bodybuilding, I believed that the authors knew what they were talking about in regard to training for sports. The exercises they recommended with barbells, dumbbells and machines were not only designed to give me a better physique, but I was told they would make me a better athlete as well.

When I was 15, I met Joe, a guy who was about eight years older than me. Joe did 1000 pushups a day and ran like a deer. He loved boxing and when he threw punches, he was loose, graceful and fast. He was in incredible shape and after talking to him I began doing hundreds of pushups a day. At the time (1979), I noted that professional boxers did not lift weights. Instead, they concentrated on pushups, situps, rope skipping and other calisthenics ... yet they hit like a truck and could do it round after round. Try holding your hands up for three minutes while throwing punches. It's not easy.

The pushups I began doing after talking to Joe, helped me get into better condition, but they were not the complete answer I needed to develop my combat skills to the fullest. Throughout the rest of my high school career, I continued to do bodybuilding exercises, and these exercises did next to nothing for me in terms of building functional strength and endurance. In the back of my mind, even when I was doing the wrong exercises for sport, I knew that there had to be exercises, with and without weights, that would benefit me more than anything else. At times I came across these exercises, but because no one else was doing them and because I didn't know anyone who could explain AND show me why they were superior, I didn't get anywhere.

Some of the most functional exercises I came across in my days as a high school and

collegiate wrestler were pushups with the elbows held close to the lats, free-hand squats, jackknife situps, reverse dips, pullups and handstand pushups. In addition, I found exercises like walking on my hands to be a tremendous upper body conditioner that also improved balance and coordination.

As for the weights, nothing compared to the snatch and clean and push press. Those two exercises hit everything, it seemed, and they made me feel like I'd accomplished something reserved for the likes of Hercules. The only problem with the snatch and clean and push press (or clean and jerk) is that, as I progressed to heavier and heavier weights, if my form was poor, the risk of injury was greater.

## **Freehand Squats Make You Explosive**

In regard to the free-hand squats mentioned earlier, I'll never forget the time during the winter of 1980, when my mother gave me an article that talked about dancers and how they built amazing strength and explosiveness in their thighs. Free squats, done in high numbers, were the key. That evening when I was doing my exercises, I began to incorporate the squats. I did 100 at a time, once per day.

Two weeks later, I was wrestling in a tournament against a guy who had beaten me three times before. In a match six weeks earlier, he soundly defeated me. But he would not be facing the same person when I shook hands with him this time. I felt like I had springs in my legs. Every move I tried felt incredibly explosive. To the shock of my opponent, I won the match - and he never beat me again.

When I got to the University of Iowa to begin my collegiate wrestling career I noticed that the best wrestler on the team, Ed Banach (a 3x NCAA champion and 1984 Olympic Gold Medalist), did not follow the same weight training routine that the others did. He followed a routine of calisthenics. The other wrestlers on the team laughed at Ed's routine. They felt it was outdated. They believed that the only way to get true strength was through weights, and that bodyweight exercises did not make you stronger.

How wrong they were.

## **The Russians**

Over the years, I have met and learned from many wrestlers and combat men - men from all over the world. In 1987, I met Gogi Parseghian, who emigrated to the U.S. from the former Soviet Union (he is related to the famous Notre Dame football coach, Ara Parseghian). Gogi had won a silver medal in Greco-Roman in the world championships and hoped to be allowed to compete for the U.S. One year, at the U.S. national Greco-Roman championships, Gogi pinned all six of his opponents in an aggregate time of less than seven minutes. He was a phenom. Yet, when Gogi came and gave a clinic at my wrestling school (at the time in Soquel, California), he said he didn't lift weights. In fact, he said that none of the Soviet wrestlers lifted weights. Instead, they did calisthenics in high repetitions. Pushups, squats,

situps, reverse pushups, bridging and the like. This mirrored what J Robinson, head wrestling coach at the University of Minnesota had told me in 1983, after he returned from the world championships in Europe. After speaking with Ivan Yarygin (the Soviet coach who pinned his way through the Olympics in 1972 at 220 pounds), J came back and said, "Yarygin says they don't lift weights. Well, whatever they are doing, they are really powerful in the lower back, hips and legs."

When you look at the old Soviet wrestlers, or the Russian wrestlers of today, you will find that they have solid builds, but they don't look like bodybuilders or weight lifters. Their build is much different from the American wrestlers, as most Americans train with weights.

When researching the Russian sambo practitioners, I found the same thing: they didn't train on weights. The same is true of people like Vladimir Vasiliev, a former member of the highly-regarded Spetznaz, who now resides near Toronto. Vladimir is strong and flexible and can move his body about any way he wants, but he doesn't train with weights and neither do the others he trained with in the former Soviet Union.

The only Russians I have seen who lift weights are Russian Olympic weight lifters.

Now, my point in writing all of this is not to persuade people to stop using weights. I simply want people to know that the notion that calisthenics don't build strength is flat out false. I want people to know that you can get strong by following a routine of calisthenic and gymnastic movements. I want weight lifters to know that they can benefit from these exercises. And I want all of you to know that these exercises don't have to be done at a spa or health club. These exercises require no fancy equipment and can be done at home or in your hotel room when you're traveling. All you need is your own body, self-discipline and the willingness to adapt and improvise.

## **One Year of Results**

From the time one year ago, when I focused on bodyweight exercises, I have gotten stronger, increased my flexibility and have greatly improved my muscular endurance - all of which are important to combat athletes. As for the movements I do in the higher-repetition range, I have noticed that doing them has given me greater mental focus and improved lung power. Believe me, it takes guts to do 500-straight Hindu squats. The benefits from the deep breathing during this long set (it takes around 15 minutes), builds strength throughout the entire body. And talk about cardiovascular conditioning. When you do 500-straight Hindu squats, your heart beat is cranked to the maximum and it stays there the whole time. Talk about fat burning! And if you're looking to pack some muscle on your thighs, or simply to tone up what you have, Hindu squats will do the trick.

Several of the people who have read and implemented the exercises in my new book, *Combat Conditioning: Functional Exercises for Fitness and Combat Sports*, have continued to train with the weights. These people have written letters to me or called me to say that they have pushed through training plateaus, that they have made significant strength gains.

One such person, prominent martial arts writer, Christopher D. Hess, has been training in

martial arts for over 20 years and has done resistance training since 1990. About the calisthenics he says, "I've reviewed and tried hundreds of programs in the last two decades. Furey's program, Combat Conditioning, is simply the best I've encountered."

## **The Client**

Steve Maxwell, a world champion in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and owner of Maxercise in Philadelphia, where he teaches weight training, told me about the client whom he began on a program of Hindu squats, Hindu pushups, pullups and bridging. Prior to this, the client had been going to a personal trainer who had him on weights. When the client began this routine he could not do five pushups, one pullup, 25 Hindu squats or hold a back bridge. Three months later, he could do 500 Hindu squats, 50 pushups, 10 pullups and hold a back bridge for a couple minutes. At that point Steve took the guy into the weight room and tested him. The client could do more weight than ever before.

Steve also followed the calisthenics program outlined in my book, and after giving the weights a break for several months, decided to test himself on his favorite lifts. All of them had improved - and that was without lifting. He also gained seven pounds of pure, rock-solid muscle. So much for not being able to build muscle with bodyweight exercises.

## **The King of All Exercises**

April of 1999 marks the date when I began training this way full-time. Karl Gotch, a 1948 Olympian from Belgium, and "The God of Wrestling" in Japan, took me under his wing and showed me this method. Karl, who is freaky strong even at 76 years of age, showed me that, in spite of a national collegiate wrestling title and a world title in Shuai-chiao kung fu, in many respects, I lacked functional strength. I was stiff in my upper back and neck. I had lower back pain from time to time and I was getting worse by the year, not better.

From the moment Karl taught me the healthful value of bridging, my life has never been the same. I can not only do a back bridge and touch my nose to the mat (something I couldn't even do as a kid), but three people can sit on my chest while I hold the position. Pretty soon I'll be able to hold four people; three on my chest and abs, one sitting across my thighs.

What has the back bridge done for me? For one, I now have a flexible neck and upper back. Most importantly though, I haven't had a twinge of lower back pain in almost a year. After passing this knowledge on to others, I was surprised to find people eager to bridge the way I was describing. It was like having a horde of people who could do the splits, suddenly realize that a strong and flexible spine was of much greater value.

Today I receive testimonial letters from people all over the world, from people who have had back surgeries, broken necks ... even from chiropractors and trainers who didn't teach the bridge because they thought it was dangerous. If there were only one exercise I could recommend to all people, combat men, weight lifters, fitness people, lay people and children, it would be bridging. It is the king of all bodyweight exercises. It trains everything in the body: the neck, the back, the hips, the thighs, buttocks, calves and chest. It stretches and strengthens the spine at the same time. Nothing compares to it.

Most importantly, the bodyweight exercises in Combat Conditioning are not what you do in an aerobics class. You don't dance around and wave your arms one way while looking the other. You don't pretend you're doing curls, but without a bar. No, these exercises are tough. They demand the utmost concentration and they will make you a believer, and quickly, too.

Don't believe me, then take the test that follows. It's only three exercises, but here's an advance warning: When you're done, you may see Jesus Christ walking across the water.

## **The Combat Conditioning Fitness Test**

### **Fitness Exercise One - 100-Straight Hindu Squats**

1. Begin with your feet shoulder-width apart and your toes pointing straight ahead.
2. Keep you back straight and lower your buttocks until your thighs are parallel to the floor.
3. As you lower your buttocks your hands are BEHIND your legs, and they follow you toward the ground.
4. As you approach the parallel-to-the-ground position, you should simultaneously raise your heels from the floor.
5. Lower your buttocks until they touch the back of your calves.
6. Push off your toes, raising your body to a standing position.
7. As you raise your body, your hands come IN FRONT of your body. They continue to rise until they are level with your chest.
8. Once you have reached the up-position, pull your arms in toward your chest as if you are rowing a boat. Make tight fists with your hands and pull. Your elbows will be next to your body as you pull.
9. Inhale as you pull your arms in, exhale as you lower yourself.
10. Stay focused on your breathing.

### **Fitness Exercise Two - 50-Straight Hindu Pushups**

1. Start with your hands on the floor, shoulder-width apart.
2. Your feet are on the floor (no knees) and your legs are wider than shoulder-width apart.

3. Starting position is butt in the air, head looking back to your heels.
4. Bend your elbows and lower your body in a circular arc, until your arms are straight. Your chest is up and your hips are almost touching the ground.
5. Look to the ceiling. Exhale.
6. Push back toward your heels once again. Straightening your arms and stretching your legs, as in #3.
7. Repeat

## **Fitness Exercise Three - Wall Walking**

1. Stand with your back and heels flat against the wall.
2. Take two steps, heel to toe, until you are three feet from the wall.
3. From there, lean backward with your hands stretched above your head.
4. Slowly move your hands down the wall. Continue walking until your head lightly touches the floor while your chest is facing the ceiling in an arch.
5. Turn to your stomach and stand up again. Repeat until you have done 10 repetitions.
6. Breathe naturally while doing this exercise.

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