

DUMBBELLS TRAINING GUIDE

CrossFit
TRAINING

In January 2016, CrossFit Founder Greg Glassman suggested that athletes are not using dumbbells enough:

“Dumbbells—nobody’s doing enough with dumbbells.”

“They’re amazing tools, and they’re hyper friendly for everything we do in CrossFit. “Friendly”—except that they make it even harder!”

“The unwieldiness of the dumbbell compared to the barbell brings all the same wonderful neurological dynamics that translate to the same increased strength one gets when comparing the parallel bars to the rings.”

“The independent axis of the rings makes the ring man a stronger parallel-bar guy than the parallel bar guy is. When I put a parallel-bar guy on the rings, they shake. Why? Is it inherent instability in the rings? No, they’re inherently stable. What you’re seeing is white noise. It’s brain noise, and you have to learn to not transmit that. And so as soon as you can make the rings steady, you’re stronger on the parallel bars. Isn’t that interesting?

You can say exactly the same for someone going from dumbbells to the barbell.”

“Dumbbells, more dumbbells, more dumbbells, more dumbbells, more dumbbells!”

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COMMON MOVEMENTS INTRODUCTION

Most foundational movements can easily accommodate a dumbbell. Some movements, such as carries and complexes, are often more practical with a dumbbell than a barbell.

Each movement offers many variations. Experimenting with these variations and combinations can offer new challenges and provide new stimulus.

The common points of performance for barbell movements are usually maintained when working with dumbbells. For example, proper performance of MOST dumbbell movements involves the following:

- A neutral spine: The lower back and pelvis should remain aligned.
 - In many single-arm variations, a neutral spine prevents twisting or favoring of one side.
- The weight should remain mostly on the heels.
- The knees should track in the same direction as the toes.
- The dumbbell should move vertically and stay close to the frontal plane.
- The hips and legs should extend before the arms contribute to the movement during more complex/dynamic lifts (core-to-extremity movement).

SQUAT SERIES

GOBLET SQUATS

The dumbbell can be held vertically **(A)** or horizontally **(B)**.



FRONT SQUATS

The dumbbells can be held horizontally **(A)** or stacked on the shoulders **(B)**. Front squats can also be performed with a single dumbbell **(C)**.



Squat Series, continued

OVERHEAD SQUATS

Overhead squats can be performed with the palm facing the ear **(A)**, which is more stable but requires more flexibility, or with the palm facing forward **(B)**, which requires less flexibility but is less stable.



(A)



(B)



Overhead squats can also be performed with two dumbbells **(C)**. This is a very advanced movement that taxes midline stabilization.



(C)



LUNGES

WALKING LUNGES

Walking lunges can be performed with one or two dumbbells held at the hang (A), in the rack position (B), overhead (C) or in a combination (D, E, F).



(A) 1 dumbbell hanging



(A) 2 dumbbells hanging



(B) 1 dumbbell racked



(B) 2 dumbbells racked



(C) 1 dumbbell overhead



(C) 2 dumbbells overhead



Lunges, continued



(D) 1 dumbbell overhead, 1 racked



(E) 1 dumbbell overhead, 1 hanging



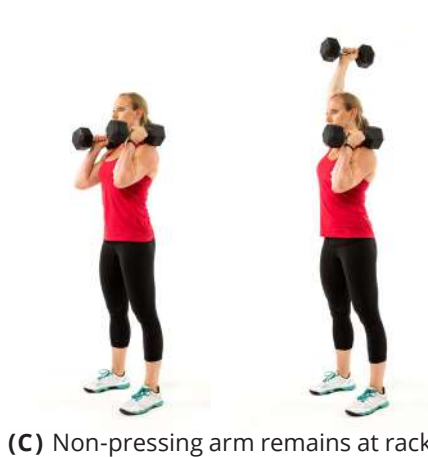
(F) 1 dumbbell racked, 1 hanging

Another option: Experiment with a heavier dumbbell in one position. Typically, you will place the heavier dumbbell in the easier position and the lighter dumbbell in the more challenging position.

PRESS SERIES

PRESSES

Presses can be performed with one **(A)** or two dumbbells **(B)**. Another option: Alternate pressing one dumbbell while holding the other at the rack **(C)** or overhead **(D)**. You can also press a single dumbbell using both arms **(E)**.



Press Series, continued

PUSH PRESSES

Dumbbell push presses can be performed with one **(A)** or two dumbbells **(B)**. Another option: Alternate push-pressing one dumbbell while holding the other at the rack or overhead **(C)**



(A) 1-dumbbell push press



(B) 2-dumbbell push press



(C) Alternating

Press Series, continued

JERKS

Dumbbell push and split jerks can be performed with one (**A, C**) or two dumbbells (**B, D**).



(A) 1-dumbbell push jerk



(B) 2-dumbbell push jerk

Press Series, continued

**(C)** 1-dumbbell split jerk**(D)** 2-dumbbell split jerk

Press Series, continued

THRUSTERS

Dumbbell thrusters can be performed with one **(A)** or two dumbbells **(B)**. Another option: Alternate pressing one dumbbell overhead while holding the other at the rack **(C)**

**(A)** 1-dumbbell thruster**(B)** 2-dumbbell thruster**(C)** 2-dumbbell alternating thruster

DEADLIFT SERIES**DEADLIFTS**

The dumbbell deadlift can be performed outside the legs, “suitcase style,” with one **(A)** or two **(B)** dumbbells, or inside the legs with a single dumbbell **(C)**



(A) 1 dumbbell outside the legs



(B) 2 dumbbells outside the legs



(C) 1 dumbbell inside the legs (requires less stability than the 1-arm suitcase style)

Deadlift Series, continued

SUMO DEADLIFT HIGH PULLS

The dumbbell sumo-deadlift high pull can be performed with one dumbbell using both **(A)** or only one arm **(B)**. The single-arm version may also be referred to as a clean pull.



(A) Dumbbell sumo deadlift high pull



(B) Single-arm sumo deadlift high pull

SWINGS

Swings can be performed by gripping the middle of the dumbbell with both hands **(A)** or the head of one dumbbell with both hands **(B)**. Make sure your equipment is in good condition if you choose the second option.



(A) Both hands grip middle



(B) Both hands grip head of dumbbell

OLYMPIC LIFTS SERIES

CLEANS

Cleans can be taken from the ground or the hang and received in the power position or the squat position. All variations can be performed with one or two dumbbells. You can experiment by starting in a wide stance with the dumbbell or dumbbells inside the legs **(1)**, but typically it is most comfortable to start a clean variation with the equipment outside the legs.



(A) 1-dumbbell power clean



(B) 2-dumbbell power clean



(C) 1-dumbbell squat clean

Olympic Lifts Series, continued

**(D)** 2-dumbbell squat clean**(E)** 1-dumbbell hang power clean**(F)** 2-dumbbell hang power clean**(G)** 1-dumbbell hang squat clean

Olympic Lifts Series, continued

**(H)** 2-dumbbell hang squat clean**(I)** 2-dumbbell power clean from inside the legs

Split cleans can also be performed from the ground or the hang with one or two dumbbells.

**(J)** 1-dumbbell split clean

Olympic Lifts Series, continued

SNATCHES

Snatches can be taken from the ground or the hang and received in the power position or the squat position. All variations can be performed with one or two dumbbells. The full squat snatch with two dumbbells is VERY challenging! You can experiment by starting with the dumbbell or dumbbells outside the legs (**I**), but typically it is most comfortable to start a snatch variation with the equipment inside the legs.



(A) 1-dumbbell power snatch



(B) 2-dumbbell power snatch



(C) 1-dumbbell squat snatch

Olympic Lifts Series, continued

**(D)** 2-dumbbell squat snatch**(E)** 1-dumbbell hang power snatch**(F)** 2-dumbbell hang power snatch (this variation is usually performed with the dumbbells inside the legs)

Olympic Lifts Series, continued



(G) 1-dumbbell hang squat snatch



(H) 2-dumbbell hang squat snatch (this variation is usually performed with the dumbbells inside the legs)

Split snatches can also be performed from the ground or the hang with one or two dumbbells. Experiment with starting from inside and outside the legs during split-snatch variations.



(I) 1-dumbbell split snatch

PULLING AND TURKISH GET-UPS**BENT-OVER ROW**

Rows can be performed with one **(A)** or two dumbbells **(B)**. Another option: Alternate rowing one dumbbell while holding the other at the hang **(C)** or at the chest **(D)**.

**(A)** 1-arm dumbbell row**(B)** 2-arm dumbbell row**(C)** Alternating: hold non-working arm at hang**(D)** Alternating: hold non-working arm at chest

Dumbbell rows can also be performed from a push-up position. Move the feet closer together to challenge torso stability further.



Pulling and Turkish Get-ups, continued

TURKISH GET-UP

The Turkish get-up is much easier to practice with a dumbbell. Keep the working arm extended and your eye on the dumbbell!



CARRY SERIES

Carries can be performed with one or two dumbbells at the hang (A—farmers carry), the rack position (B), overhead (C) or in a combination (D, E, F).



(A) 1-dumbbell farmers carry



(A) 2-dumbbells farmers carry



(B) 1 dumbbell at rack



(B) 2 dumbbells at rack



(C) 1 dumbbell overhead



(C) 2 dumbbells overhead

Carry Series, continued



(D) 1 dumbbell overhead, 1 at rack



(E) 1 dumbbell overhead, 1 at hang



(F) 1 dumbbell at rack, 1 at hang

Another option: Experiment with a heavier dumbbell in one position **(G)**. Typically, you will place the heavier dumbbell in the easier position and the lighter dumbbell in the more challenging position.



(G) 1 light dumbbell at rack, 1 heavy dumbbell at hang

COMBINATIONS AND COMPLEXES

Dumbbells allow for a huge amount of movement variance. Even if you don't have access to a range of dumbbells, you can challenge yourself with a single pair of dumbbells and a little creativity.

Sequencing several movements together is often referred to as a “complex,” and dozens of variations exist to provide excellent mental and physical challenges.

A few guidelines for building good complexes:

- Too many movements will be hard to remember and slow things down.
- Too few movements might not be challenging enough

Usually, two to five movements put you in the “sweet spot,” but experiment with the complex before committing to the workout! Some complexes look great on paper but fall apart in practice. Aim for movement combinations that flow naturally. If it's really awkward in warm-up, it will only get worse when fatigue sets in!

Two common approaches when working with a complex:

1) The “one big rep” approach:

- Perform each movement once, then the next.

The entire sequence counts as 1 “big rep”; i.e., with a single dumbbell:

- 1-dumbbell deadlift between the legs
- 1-dumbbell power snatch
- 1-dumbbell overhead walking lunge step left leg
- 1-dumbbell overhead walking lunge step right leg
- 1-dumbbell push jerk

Switch hands and repeat the sequence with the left arm to complete one rep.

2) Repetition approach:

- Do each movement for a few reps before moving on to the next; i.e., with two dumbbells:
 - 3 dumbbell deadlifts
 - 3 dumbbell hang squat cleans
 - 3 dumbbell push jerks

Either method can then be used in a **standalone workout** or to provide **one element of a workout**.

Combinations and Complexes, continued

STANDALONE:**One Big Rep:**

With a 70-lb. dumbbell, complete 20 “reps” for time of:

- 1 dumbbell deadlift between the legs
- 1 dumbbell power snatch
- 1 dumbbell overhead walking lunge step left leg
- 1 dumbbell overhead walking lunge step right leg
- 1 dumbbell push jerk

(1 rep = all the way through with the right hand, then all the way through with the left)

Repetition Method:

With 2 50-lb. dumbbells, complete the following every minute for 15 minutes:

- 5 dumbbell deadlifts
- 5 dumbbell hang squat cleans
- 5 dumbbell push jerks

ONE ELEMENT OF A WORKOUT:**One Big Rep:**

Complete as many rounds as possible in 20 minutes of:

- 2 reps of:
 - 1 dumbbell deadlift between the legs
 - 1 dumbbell power snatch
 - 1 dumbbell overhead walking lunge step left leg
 - 1 dumbbell overhead walking lunge step right leg
 - 1 dumbbell push jerk
- Run 400 m

(1 rep = all the way through with the right hand, then all the way through with the left)

Repetition Method:

With 2 50-lb. dumbbells complete 7 rounds for time of:

- 5 dumbbell deadlifts
- 5 dumbbell hang squat cleans
- 5 dumbbell push jerks
- 10 calories on the Assault AirBike

GENERAL IMPLEMENTATION NOTES

CONVERTING BARBELL WORKOUTS AND CREATING DUMBBELL WORKOUTS

It's not uncommon to reduce the total load by about 5–10 percent when converting a workout that uses a barbell. No hard and fast rule or absolute authority governs conversion, so you will have to rely on your knowledge and experience to try to match the intent of the original workout.

EXAMPLE: FRAN

- Dumbbell Fran is just about right using 45-lb./30-lb. dumbbells.
- This breaks down to 90 lb./60 lb. of total dumbbell weight instead of 95/65 lb. of barbell weight—a difference of 5–10 percent.

Other considerations will change the choice of dumbbell load:

- 1) The heavier the barbell and the more complex the movement(s) in the original workout, the more you will need to reduce the total weight of the dumbbells.**

EXAMPLE: DT

5 rounds for time of:

155-lb. deadlift, 12 reps

155-lb. hang power clean, 9 reps

155-lb. push jerk, 6 reps

- If we apply the same conversion strategy as we did with Fran, we will end up with a workout that is much more difficult than the original.
- 70-lb. dumbbells would equal 140 lb., or a 10 percent reduction in barbell weight. Try it and see for yourself. This prescription will be much harder than the original barbell variation for most people.
- The fatigue of controlling two heavy objects instead of one moderately heavy object usually demands more of grip and upper-body stamina.
- In cases like this, taking the total weight down more than 5-10 percent will keep the intensity high and preserve technique.

- 2) Are you doing a single or double dumbbell version of the workout?**

- If you choose to do a single-arm version, consider using a heavier dumbbell than you would use if you chose to do a double-dumbbell “match” of the barbell weight.
- Single-arm Fran wouldn't make sense with one 40-lb./30-lb. dumbbell because the load on the legs is relatively insignificant (less than the empty barbell and less than 50 percent of the original load).
- One option is using a heavier dumbbell: Divide the 21 thrusters between left and right arms with a 60-lb. dumbbell.
- If you are limited to a lighter weight, you can increase the reps to make up for the lighter load: 21 thrusters right arm, 21 thrusters left arm, 21 pull-ups, etc.
- The effects of some barbell workouts will be very different with two dumbbells. For example, a double-dumbbell Isabel will be much different than the barbell benchmark. This is fine if you want the added technical and positional challenge, but if you are looking to recreate the stimulus of the original, a single heavy dumbbell is probably better.

General Implementation Notes, continued

CREATING YOUR OWN DUMBBELL WORKOUTS

The biggest factor to consider when creating a dumbbell workout is how the dumbbells will affect the other movements you will be performing.

For example, a high-rep workout with dumbbell cleans and pull-ups might force rest earlier than you want simply due to grip failure. This is OK if you are training grip stamina, but make sure that's the intent, not something you discover halfway through the workout.

Remember:

- Grip and upper-body stamina are taxed more with dumbbells.
- Simple pairings that emphasize intensity are often best.
- Pick movements that don't overlap with each other much; i.e., cleans and dips require very different functions and are complementary.
- Complexes are great, but make sure to test them out ahead of time.