

Keep Your Chin Up
How to master the king of relative strength tests
by Christian Thibaudeau

Chin-ups are a strange animal. They can humble the strongest lifter as easily as an unsatisfied ex-girlfriend. On the other hand, mastering the art of the chin-up — doing lots of solid, easy reps — is always impressive and is generally well correlated with a good overall physical condition and solid athletic potential.

To dominate this exercise, one must possess a strong back, strong arms, a firm grip, lots of body control, and strength endurance in the forearms and hands. This makes the chin-up quite possibly the best test of relative strength available.

The tough thing about chin-ups is that the slightest weak link will kill your progress. Few people are limited by back or biceps strength (although it can happen) and many people who *seem* to have all the tools to be successful, instead fail miserably! Remember that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. This is certainly true with chin-ups, so the fastest way to become a great chinner is to correct your weaknesses and improve your strengths. This article will give you a breakdown of what you need to do and will present different programs depending on your level of capacities.

Also, just for clarification, by "chin-up" I mean pulling yourself up to a bar with your palms facing you. A "pull-up," on the other hand, is a type of chin-up where the palms are facing away from your body.

Covering all the Angles

To have success at chin-ups you must have an adequate level of several different physical capacities. Here's a rundown of what physical qualities are required for each structure:

Hands: Static strength, static strength-endurance

Forearms: Dynamic strength, dynamic strength-endurance

Arm flexors (biceps and brachialis): Dynamic strength, dynamic strength-endurance

Upper back (rhomboids, lats and mid traps): Dynamic strength, dynamic strength-endurance, static strength, static strength-endurance

Abdominal wall and lower back: Static strength, static strength-endurance

Psychological: Resistance to pain

Advantageous body weight and body fat: The heavier you are, the harder chins will be!

As you can see, you need to possess a lot of different capacities. The slightest weakness will undoubtedly inhibit any progress you'd normally make.

Hand strength and strength-endurance is probably the most neglected aspect of physical performance. These physical qualities have a *huge* influence on your capacity to do a lot of reps. Simply put, your hands connect your body to the bar; if your grip isn't rock solid there's no way you can apply maximum force on the bar and you'll perform below your potential.

Here's an example to help you understand this concept: try to deadlift a heavy load while squeezing the life out of the bar. Now try the same load with a weak, soft grip. Which one is easier? The first one obviously! But why? After all, you did have the same strength potential in both attempts. The answer lies in the grip! The firmer your grip, the more of your strength you can apply to the bar.

I've rarely seen athletes who possess enough hand strength to fully utilize the strength of their body. Exceptions include hockey players, grapplers, and gymnasts who develop a lot of wrist and hand strength practicing their sport. As a result, including some hand strength exercises can be a good way to increase almost anyone's chinning power.

Having strong forearms is also a prerequisite for a good chin-up performance. Furthermore, strength alone isn't enough. You must have a lot of strength-endurance in your forearms. You'll find that, more often than not, your hands and forearms give up first, or at the very least, fatigue in your forearms will greatly reduce your pulling power.



I personally have very small hands and always had a weak grip. This greatly impaired my performance in the Olympic lifts, deadlifts, and chin-ups. Only when I started to work hard on my hands and forearms did these lifts improve. As you can see in my forearm pictures, what was once a weak point is now one of my strongest.



So the first step in building your chinning and pulling power is to have strong hands and forearms. Here's a routine that's sure to improve those areas.

Thibaudeau's Hands and Forearms Strength Routine

A) Dynamic "Captain of Crush"

5 sets per hand, as many reps as possible until you reach 15-20

212 tempo (See our FAQ section if you're unfamiliar with tempo numbers.) [link](#)

60 seconds rest between each set

You'll need some specialty equipment to do parts of this program. This particular exercise requires the "Captain of Crush" grippers produced by Ironmind. These grippers aren't your ordinary plastic toys found in sporting goods stores, which only require around 20 to 40 pounds of force to close. These things are brutal!

The COC grippers come in four different "strengths." The so-called "Trainer" gripper requires that you produce 100 pounds of force to close it. The No.1 gripper requires 140 and the No.2 requires 195, while the No.3 requires 280 pounds of force. The dreaded No.4, which only one man in the world has closed, requires 365 pounds of force to be closed completely!

The No.3 and obviously No.4 grippers aren't really useful for most individuals. If you can work up to the No.2 gripper (which will take some time), then hand strength will no longer be one of your weak points. Most people would only need to invest in the first two strengths (the Trainer and the No.1), and maybe a No.2.





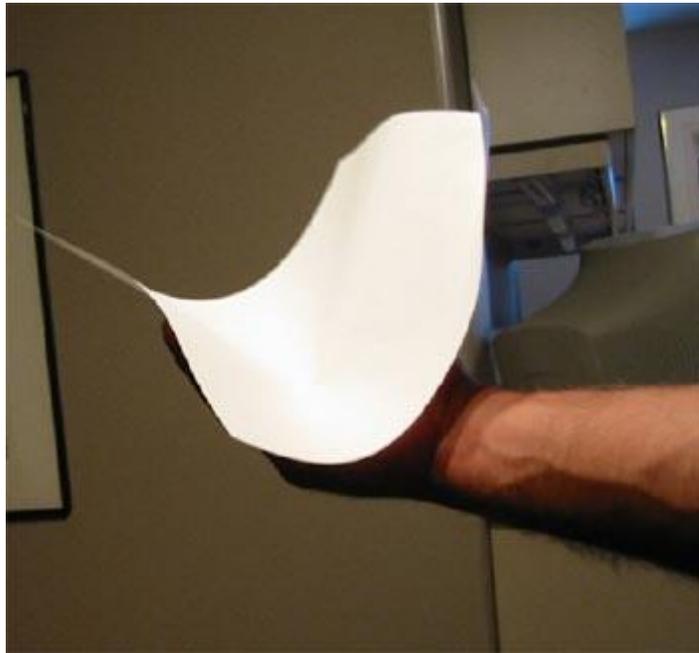
For the first exercise we're going to do reps just closing the grippers. You're going to close them several times in a set, just like any other exercise. To improve your hand strength and strength endurance you should do 15 to 20 reps per set. Chances are you won't be able to do that at first. Don't worry, it's normal. Simply do as many reps as you can and when you reach 15 to 20 reps you can start to use the next strongest gripper.

B) Paper folding

As many "sets" as possible for each hand

No rest between sets

This next exercise might seem easy or even idiotic... that is, until you try it! It's a great drill to increase hand strength-endurance and digital dexterity. The objective of the exercise is to hold a sheet of paper in your hand, then using only this one hand, crunch it into a tight ball. If you succeed, try it with two sheets. Add sheets until you're unable to reduce them to a tiny ball.





For this exercise you simply go on until you fail. Don't take any rest between "sets." If you can ball one sheet, go to two immediately and so on. This will build great strength-endurance in your hands.

C) Forearm roll

3 sets of 5 reps

90 seconds rest between each set

This is a classic forearm exercise. I've yet to find another exercise that can build as much strength-endurance and size in the forearms. You'll need a forearm roller, but there's no need to buy one as they're really easy to make. The picture of my own roller should help you build your own.







To perform this exercise correctly you must "roll" the weight up and down under control. Don't let it drop down after you roll it up; instead roll it down in a controlled manner. You'll use three sets of five "reps." A rep consists of rolling the weight up, then back down. When you can complete three sets of five reps with good form, increase the load.

D) Isometric "Captain of Crush"

3 sets per hand of max time

90 seconds rest between each set

Once again, using the COC grippers, we're going to work on static endurance. Close the gripper and hold it closed for as long as you can. Aim for 45 to 60 seconds. At first, few will last over 30 seconds, even with the easier grippers, but work your way up slowly.



As you can see, this routine can be performed anywhere as long as you have the necessary material and equipment. I recommend doing it two to three times per week as a supplementary workout. You can perform this short workout at home or even on your lunch break! You can do it in the gym too, but if you choose to do so, do your main workout first. One word of caution: try not to do this workout the day before a pulling workout.

Level 1 Chin-up Program: The Newbie Routine

Now that we've covered basic hand and forearm strength, let's jump right into increasing your chinning abilities.

This first chin-up program is for individuals who can't complete at least one chin-up in good form. (If you can do more than one, go ahead and skip to the next level.) It should be performed for four weeks, after which you'll retest yourself on the chins to establish which

level to do next. A good goal for this level is to perform five complete chin-ups after four weeks of training on this program.

A) Incline chin-up

3 sets of max reps

211 tempo

60 seconds rest between each set

This exercise is a good way to develop your capacity to lift your own body. It's the equivalent of the push-up for the back muscles. You'll need a power rack and a bar to perform this drill.

Set the safety pins about mid-thigh level and place the bar on the pins. Grab the bar with a shoulder-width grip, put your feet on the floor and keep your body straight. Bring yourself up by pulling on the bar.





B) Three-position static holds

2 "sets"

90 seconds between each position

In this exercise you're going to hold specific positions of the chin-up motion. You may need a partner or a bench to get into the proper positions. Hold each position for as long as you can.

Position 1: Finished chin-up position



Position 2: Mid-range



Position 3: Starting position



C) Lat pulldown to the front (chin grip)

1 x 7, 1 x 6, 1 x 5, 1 x 4, 1 x 3

311 tempo

90 seconds rest between each set

While this exercise can't replace the chin-up, it can be a useful exercise to strengthen the muscles involved in the chin-up.





We want to really focus on maximal strength on this exercise to get you ready for chinning as fast as possible. You're going to do sets of 7, 6, 5, 4 and 3 reps. Add weight on every set.

D) Partial chins

1 set of 5 reps

201 tempo

With partial chins you start from the finished chin position, lower yourself slightly and bring yourself back up. Obviously, the lower you go, the harder it gets. So every week try to go down a bit lower on each rep.







This exercise will greatly help you improve your chin-up strength. Don't judge your progress on your performance in this drill as it's performed last in the workout and your muscles and nervous system are already fried. You'll only do one set of five reps, each rep must be completed, so only go down as low as you can while still being able to pull yourself back up.

After the completion of this 4-week program, take two days off from training and test yourself on the chin-up. If you can do four to six complete chins in good form you can go up to level two confidently. If you can only do one to three chins you can still go on to level two, but you'd probably be better off using the level one program for two to four more weeks.

Level 2 Chin-up Program: The Regular Guy Routine

This program is for individuals who can complete between four and six chin-ups in good form. It also lasts four weeks, after which you test yourself again. A good goal is to aim for 10 to 12 complete reps after the four weeks, then you can go up to the next level.

A) Negative chins

5 x 10-12

6 second negative tempo

90 seconds rest between each set

This drill is great to build up strength as well as strength-endurance in the specific chin-up muscles. It's also great for developing mental toughness. In this drill, get a partner to help you into the top chin-up position on the bar (or do this yourself by jumping up), and then lower yourself under control.





Since our goal is to perform 10 to 12 chin-ups, we're going to do sets of 10 to 12 negative chins. Try to lower yourself to a six second count. Chances are that the first three or four reps won't be a problem, but it'll get tougher as the set goes on. When you can complete the 12 reps with a six second negative tempo, add some weight (via a weight belt).

B) Staggered chins

20 total reps

201 tempo

30-60 seconds rest between each set that you need to complete the 20 reps

The objective here is to complete 20 chins. Take as many sets as you need to complete all 20. You may need 10 to 15 sets to complete the 20 reps. That's okay. However, each week try to complete all the reps using less and less sets. Ideally, at the end of the program you'd only need two to four sets to complete all the reps.

C) Partial chins

2 sets of 12 reps

201 tempo

90 seconds rest between each set

With partial chins you start from the finished chin position, lower yourself slightly, and bring yourself back up. The lower you go, the harder it gets, so every week try to go down a bit lower on each rep.

This exercise will greatly help you improve your chin-up strength. You'll do two sets of 12 reps. Each rep must be completed, so only go down as low as you can while still being able to pull yourself back up.

Once again, after the completion of this 4-week program, take two days off and test your chin-up max. If you can complete anywhere between 10 to 15 chins, you can go up to the third and last level. If you only do 6 to 9 chins you can also progress to level three, but you'd be better off doing two to four more weeks of level two training.

Level 3 Chin-up Program: The T-man Routine

This program is for individuals who can already complete between 10 and 15 chin-ups in good form (full reps with a controlled tempo). It also lasts four weeks, after which you'll test yourself again. A good goal is to aim for 20 to 22 complete reps after the four weeks.

A) Negative chins

5 x 20-22

3 seconds negative tempo

90 seconds rest between each set

Get a partner to help you into the top chin-up position on the bar (or do this yourself by jumping), and then lower yourself under control.





Since our goal is to perform 20 to 22 chin-ups, we're going to do sets of 20 to 22 negative chins. Try to lower yourself to a three second count. This will be easy enough at first, but will get tougher as the set progresses. By now you should be able to add some weight on this exercise.

B) Mid-grip pull-ups

5 x 5

301

90 seconds rest between each set

Pull-ups (palms facing away from you) are a good assistance exercise for chins as they're actually harder to perform. Increasing your strength in pull-ups will generally transfer positively to your chin-up performance.







C) Lat pulldown to the front (palms facing you)

2 x 40

201

90 seconds rest between each set

We're now going to use the lat pulldown to build specific strength-endurance in the chin-up muscles. By now you have the strength necessary to do well, but you need to develop the capacity to *maintain* that strength level for a long time. You're going to do sets of 40 reps on the lat pulldown. Start light! At 20 reps the set might seem easy, but fatigue will quickly set in afterward.

D) Regular chin-ups

3 x max

201

90 seconds between each set

We're going to do our chins at the end of the workout. By now you're completely wiped out so these will be hard! Expect to do very few reps, but performing this drill in an extremely fatigued state will really help you get those extra four to five chins at the end of your test!

After four weeks on this program you'll need to take four days of complete rest before testing yourself on the chin-ups. This is a hardcore program and will really drive you into the ground, but in the end your body will respond with a glorious improvement in chinning power!

Workout Frequency

Hand/Forearms Workout

Times per week performed: 2-3

When to perform: Anytime, but at least 24 hours away from a pulling workout. However, you can do it *after* a chinning workout.

Level 1: Newbie Routine

Times per week: 2

When to perform: First training day of the week. Repeat 3 days after.

Level 2 Regular Guy Routine

Times per week: 2

When to perform: First training day of the week. Repeat 3 days after

Level 3 T-man Routine

Times per week: 1

When to perform: First training day of the week.

Other Workouts

While you use this program you should not do any additional upper back workout. Also, you shouldn't do another body part on the same day as your chin-up specialization workouts. Other than those restrictions you can use pretty much any training split you see fit. If you want to do the Olympic lifts, you should do them at least 48 hours after a chin-up workout.

Concluding Remarks

This training progression will increase your chin-up and pulling power immensely. However, not everybody will be able to go through all levels. Some people aren't built to do 25 chin-ups. The biggest limiting factor is obviously your body fat percentage, so if you're serious about posting huge chin-ups numbers, you should try to minimize your body fat levels.

Now go hit the bar! (The chinning bar that is!)

Note: Got a question for Coach Thibaudeau? Join him in his forum – [The Lair of the Ice Dog](#) – exclusively at *T-mag*!

About the Author

Christian Thibaudeau is a strength and conditioning coach who works with a wide range of elite athletes. He has successfully trained athletes requiring a wide array of physical qualities ranging from strength and power (football players, Olympic lifters, strongmen competitors) and important energetic capacities (hockey players) to proprioception and stabilization/balance (figure skaters). He's also a competitive Olympic weightlifter and a football coach. Christian is completing his M.Sc. degree in exercise science and has been a research assistant in that field for the past two years.