

# GET YOUR FIRST PULL-UP

A 6-Step System  
For Getting Above The Bar



BY ZACK HENDERSON

# Get Your First Pull-Up

## A 6-Step System For Getting Above The Bar

There are many measures of fitness - from marathons to max deadlifts...

But when it comes to a lift that bestows elite total-body strength and control, the pull-up rules.

There's nothing like the thrill that comes from grabbing a bar (or tree branch), lifting yourself up, and enjoying the view from the top. Pull-ups are not only super fun, they also build the back, core, arms, and shoulders like no other exercise can.

Why, then, are strict and clean pull-ups such a rarity?

In addition to the questionable info we get from middle school PE teachers and mass media, pull-ups are rarely trained as a **skill**.

Skills can be broken down into constituent parts and mastered sequentially.

And that's exactly what we're gonna do with the pull-up!

By following this sequence, you will bypass common mistakes, train the right muscles, and get your strongest upper body ever.

Understand that based on your training history and body type, these exact exercises may not be optimal for you right now, but they represent the patterns and skills you'll need to strengthen for a solid pull-up.

# #1 - The Straight Arm Hang



The first “shape” we have to get comfortable with is a simple bar hang.

Holding a hang for time is going to accomplish a few things:

- Strengthen your grip
- Condition the muscles and connective tissue of your arms, shoulders, and back
- Get you comfortable with being off the ground

Straight arm hangs are a great catch-all exercise for the upper body to help combat hunched, tight sitting posture.

The technique is simple:

- Find a suitable pull-up bar low enough that doesn't require you to jump. Step up on a box or use the adjustable bar of a smith machine rack if needed.
- Grip the bar overhand just outside shoulder-width. Be sure not to pinch the skin at the base of the fingers > [Watch this helpful video](#) <

- One at a time, slowly bring your feet off the ground. Tighten the core, stiffen the legs, and point the toes into a hollow body position.
- Hold for time.
- Breathe.

> [Straight Arm Hang Video](#) <

## #2 - The Bodyweight Row



Next, we'll work the back and shoulder muscles through a full range of motion - from arms fully straight to fully bent.

As opposed to the vertical nature of the pull-up (arms overhead), the bodyweight row is a horizontal pull exercise (arms in front). While the angles aren't specific to the pull-up, this exercise will strengthen and coordinate the same muscle groups.

The bodyweight row can be performed on many different types of equipment (TRX, rings, fixed bars), but the execution is the same:

- Adjust whatever you'll be rowing on to between chest and hip level height.

- Grasp the handles/rings/bar and get into an inverse table position - back and hips parallel to the floor, knees bent, feet flat.
- Row yourself up until your hand meets your torso or your chest touches the bar.
- Lower slowly and repeat.

> [Bodyweight Row Video](#) <

## #3 - The Scapular Pull-Up



For this exercise, we go back to the pull-up bar to take our straight arm hang to the next level.

The scap pull-up will strengthen the start of the pull-up by training the proper movement pattern and activation of the back and shoulder muscles. It's a subtle and sometimes tricky move to get down, but ample practice will save you time and effort down the road.

- Follow the same setup as the straight arm hang.

- Relax the upper back and shoulders, allowing the shoulders to rise and shrug up to the ears.
- Pull the shoulder blades down, creating space around the neck.
- Slowly relax back down.
- The arms remain straight at all times.

> [Scapular Pull-up Video](#) <

## #4 - The “Seat” Row



This little-known exercise bridges the gap between horizontal and vertical pulling strength.

I stumbled across this move in my attempts at practicing an advanced gymnastics drill called the [lat fly](#). It combines the row from step #2 with the flexed arm lockout from step

#5. Like the bodyweight row, it may be performed on rings, suspension trainers, or a fixed bar.

- Set up in the same manner as the bodyweight row.
- Simultaneously pull your hands to your shoulders (lock out position) and sit your hips straight down.
- You'll end up with a vertical torso, hips under shoulders, knees bent, and feet flat.
- You may use a palm forwards or palms turned-in grip.

> [Seat Row Video](#) <

## #5 - The Flexed Arm Hang



Step #1 got us comfortable with the starting position of the pull-up. Now, we'll tackle the finish. It's been said that if you own the top and the bottom, the middle will almost take care of itself!

The very top of the pull-up is often the most challenging part. Getting (and keeping) your chin over the bar requires tremendous strength and control.

Thanks to the work you did in step #4, you're ready to handle full hangs!

- Find a suitable pull-up bar low enough that doesn't require you to jump. Step up on a box or use the adjustable bar of a smith machine rack if needed.
- You may grip the bar overhand, just outside shoulder width, or underhand, just inside the shoulders.
- Position your chin over the bar with arms in full flexion.
- One at a time, slowly bring your feet off the ground. Tighten the core, stiffen the legs, and point the toes into a hollow body position.
- Keep actively pulling the bar down towards the chest with eyes forward and head neutral. Relax the face.
- Hold for time.
- Breathe.

> [Flexed Arm Hang Video](#) <



## #6 - The Pull-Up Negative



Finally, we are going to complete a full range of motion pull-up... in reverse!

By working the negative, or lowering step, you'll coordinate and strengthen the muscles at the same angles required by a standard pull-up.

Negatives are often used in strength programs to get the body acclimated to handling heavy weights that are otherwise difficult (or impossible) to otherwise lift.

For our purposes, the negative will fill any gaps in the movement and bestow practically all of the same strength and skill gains from the full pull-up.

- Follow the same setup as the flexed arm hang.
- Slowly lower yourself in one smooth motion.
- End in the straight arm hang position.
- Come off the bar, rest, and repeat.

> [Pull-Up Negative Video](#) <

And there you have it, a proven step-by-step blueprint for achieving your first pull-up!

Here are performance standards that can serve as benchmarks along the way:

**Beginner Standard:**

Straight Arm Hang x 45s

Bodyweight Row x 10

Scapular Pull-Up x 10

**Intermediate Standard:**

Seat Row x 10

Flexed Arm Hang x 15s

Negative (3s) x 3

**Advanced Standard:**

Flexed Arm Hang x 30s

Negative (5s) x 5

If you can consistently perform slow negatives for 5+ reps, you're strong enough for standard pull-ups!

**Grip it and rip it!**