

## “The 5 Exercises Everyone Should Be Able To Perform – Part 1”

By John Izzo ([www.standAPARTfitness.com](http://www.standAPARTfitness.com))

I am often confused when I see personal trainers acquire new clients and begin their exercise journey with some strength training circuit or group exercise class. I often wonder what is the trainer thinking when they are devising this person's exercise program? Were they thinking at all? I know 95% of client goals are based on fat loss and none of them ever “want to be an athlete”. But do you know how many times I have told clients, “*You don't want to be an athlete, but you want to look like one?*”

So the wheels begin to turn and the education process begins. The physique of an athlete reflects the protocol of performance training. What kind of performance? Doesn't matter. Athletes have been shown to be more in-tune with muscular control, alertness, proprioception, elasticity, and power...not too mention higher levels of lean body mass and decreased body fat.

So what do you do with a general population client (GPC)? The main objective of a fitness professional should be to improve function. No matter what the goal is. A competent trainer will understand that by improving function and performance, you will elicit muscle gain and fat loss. If the trainer does not understand that, he or she must go back to their textbooks and read again. So what kind of performance training does the GPC need? They need performance enhancement of activities of daily living (ADLs). Some GPCs may be mothers, weekend warriors, marathon runners, post orthopedic rehab, or active older adults. However, the main performance improvement training (PIT) protocol begins with mastering progressions of primal movements.

An efficient human body (*meaning one without congenital functional restrictions or history of injury, surgery, or mental trauma*) should be able to perform five basic primal movements learned within the first 4 years of life. The 5 basic functions of human performance translated into exercise are:

- 1.) Squat
- 2.) Lunge
- 3.) Step-Up
- 4.) Push-up
- 5.) Ab Crunch

These basic exercises are precursors to numerous loaded and unloaded exercises. I cannot think of an instance where a GPC has not executed any of these movements in his or her life. I cannot visualize a single GPC that can perform any of these exercises flawlessly. Even so, maybe no one can perform these primal exercises 100% flawless, but your job as the fitness professional is to get them *real close*. How close? **Absolutely no GPC should progress to any other advanced movement until body control skills have improved, “fundamental strength” has increased, and pain/discomfort has vanished.** How long will this take? Just like any other exercise program adherence, the timeline to performance improvement in these exercises depends on client/trainer interaction, frequency, proper cueing, and effective instruction. I have seen clients improve on these 5 exercises in 1 week, and some 5-6 weeks. The wonderful thing about beginning any exercise program with these primal movement exercises is that any discussed or fathomed pains

(“my knee has problems when I climb stairs” or “my shoulder aches in the morning upon waking”) seem to disappear. Wow.

Most of today’s movement assessments are based around these five exercises. For the trained fitness professional, they can serve as analytical information regarding muscle imbalances, weakness, tightness, dysfunction, history of injury, and baseline testing procedures. Another advantage to developing exercise programs around these 5 exercises is there is no need for equipment or space. Clients can work on these primal movements in the convenience of their homes, hotels, or park. Remember, one of the factors I discussed earlier in regards to timeline of progression was frequency. How often are they performing these five exercises correctly on their own? And if the instruction and cueing is potent, advanced movements can be added leading to faster results.

### Squat

The squat is performed in most sporting situations. However, it is also performed by GPC with every visit to the lavatory. You laugh, but this is why these 5 exercises are deemed “primal”. The human body should be able to perform these exercises if there is no congenital defect, function altering injury, or neurological impedance. The squat exercise involves bilateral, symmetrical, and functional mobility of the hips, knees, and ankles. The ability to perform the squat correctly requires appropriate pelvic rhythm, closed-chain dorsiflexion of the ankles, flexion of the knees and hips, and extension of the thoracic spine.



### Lunge



The lunge is another primal movement that puts the body in a position that will focus on the stresses as simulated during rotational, decelerating, and lateral movements. The lunge places the lower body in a “scissored” position—similar to walking, jogging, and running—and requires stability in the stance leg (ankle, knee and hip) and closed chain hip abduction. The difficulty with the lunge in GPC’s is the lack of stability due to the rotational stress imposed. Bottom line...master the lunge and you are on your way to improve your walking and running mechanics. If you do that? Hello speed and elusiveness.

### Step-up

Another primal movement that simulates activities of daily living (walking up and down stairs, overcoming curbs, getting in and out of a car) is the step-up. The step up helps in challenging the body’s stride mechanics using proper coordination and stability between the hips and torso. The step up is perfect for assessing bilateral function mobility and stability of the hips, knees, and ankles. In addition, the



step-up exercise also involves adequate balance because of the demand for dynamic stability.

## Push-up

This upper body closed chain exercise is the single best primal movement for upper body performance improvement. The push-up stresses trunk stability in the sagittal plane. Many activities require the trunk stabilizers to transfer force symmetrically from the upper extremities to the lower extremities and vice versa. If the trunk lacks stability, energy will disperse leading to poor functional performance, and increased chance of chronic injury. I have always been a fan of teaching clients the same cue's I instruct them with, so that when they perform these exercises alone, they can visualize that correct positioning that I would request. One deviation from what I desire in a push-up is the "clothesline-effect". This is characterized by the client getting into a standard push-up position and performing 2-3 reps before witnessing the neck jut forward, and the abdominals fall down as if they are leading the exercise with the mid-section. In the same manner as a clothesline that has too many wet clothes in the center and both ends are stable. The "straight line" disappears. We want to maintain that line beginning with the trunk. Ideally, all GPC should begin this exercise in the modified position with knees on floor and ankles crossed. To decrease the lever arm (in this case, the trunk) allows the client more muscular control and proper execution of cues. Once the modified version is acceptable, the standard position can commence.



## Ab Crunch



How many times are you going to be on your back and perform spinal flexion? Every morning you do. Unless you are a bat and hang upside-down. The crunch gets a lot of flack because it has been regarded as *non-functional* to sport and is merely a cosmetic exercise. However, if properly cued, the ab crunch can help the GPC engage the abdominals while decreasing the lordotic curve and accentuating proper TVA

firing. *Ahh...the beginnings of core work.* Think about it...every morning you get up from a 7-8 hour sleep without a warm-up and rotate your trunk. I used to have clients perform a simple task of laying supine on the floor and practicing getting up. After they would get up, they would lie back down and repeat 10-15 times! Movement times decreased in the first week. Clients got up faster and had more control.

I am very content with these five exercises. To the contrary, I would have added chin-ups (or pull-ups), but in my experience, I never had access to a stationed bar to put clients on. The chin-up is an excellent indicator of pure upper body strength and can definitely be the sixth, but because its need for a stable bar, the factors becomes skewed (frequency and versatility).

**In Part 2, I will examine the various advanced movements that these five exercises can be progressed to.**

## References

Cook, G. and Burton L. 2006. The Functional Movement Screen. *Perform Better – The Magazine* (Spring 2006): 9-11

**About the Author:** John Izzo holds a Bachelor's degree in Exercise Science with a minor in Health Promotion specializing in Community Nutrition. He holds multiple certifications from the National Academy of Sports Medicine (NASM), American Council on Exercise (ACE), National Endurance Sports Trainers Association (NESTA), American Fitness Professionals & Associates (AFPA), Schwinn Cycling, and APEX Training Systems.

John has been involved in the fitness industry since 1992, and has enjoyed a successful career as a personal trainer since 1998. He has helped transform the lives (and bodies) of hundreds of fitness enthusiasts and athletes in facilities located in Connecticut, such as World Gym, Gold's Gym, and Healthtrax, Inc.

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