

“5 Exercises Everyone Should Be Able To Perform – Part 2”

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In Part 1, I discussed the five essential exercises that serve as precursors to Performance Improvement Training (PIT). The five discussed were:

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

What was established was the following: a.) these exercises can serve as foundational assessments for the fitness professional; b.) these exercises require no equipment, thus, they can be performed anywhere/anytime; c.) these exercises are representation of everyday movements practiced by humans unless a functional alteration is present (injury history, birth defect, neurological disorder). It was also mentioned, that in my experience I would have liked to include a “pulling” exercise like the chin-up or pull-up, however, because of the need for a stable bar, I was never able to incorporate it in this movement circuit. I caught a lot of flack because the chin-up was excluded because “pulling” exercises are always performed in everyday life. This is so, but initially, general population clients (GPC) cannot pull their bodyweight or become intimidated at the sight of a fixed bar overhead and cringe at the thought of lifting their body. Bottom line? I like the exercise, but working with GPC’s, it not one I see making exercise program adherence easier and more functional than it already is. Wouldn’t the ab crunch be considered a “pulling” exercise? Why do we equate a pulling exercise with biceps or back? Isn’t lifting the torso from a supine position a “pull”? Something to ponder...

Let’s examine some tips for each exercise and points to remember:

1.) Squat

Heels in contact with floor

This is a cue used to remind clients that they must engage the glutes and hamstrings in the movement.

Are elevated heels needed?

A board under the heels initially is a band-aid, but it will assist your client in “understanding” what you want. Eventually, the board should be reduced or eliminated and mobility of the ankles should be increased.

Lordotic back on descent

Tell-tale sign of a weak core.

Core & Glute activation

This is so important and the reason why we need to squat correctly. If the client feels it too much in the quads, the movement is not being done correctly.

What prevents a good squat?

Flexibility and mobility are the culprits to poor squat form. Also, many clients try to perform the squat with loads. This is why we favor the bodyweight squat as a primal movement to be mastered unloaded.

How deep is deep?

Again, a question of flexibility and mobility. Once these are accomplished, then it becomes a question of overall strength.

2.) Lunge

Back foot/leg placement

How many times does a client feel it in the back leg on a lunge? Typically, they feel the stretch of the tight adductor of the back leg. The working leg is the front, so foot placement and "control" become important.

Core Activation

Abdominals should be drawn in with torso "proud" and hips mobile. Typically, GPCs perform this with their stomach hanging out and no TVA activation. That is okay, as these 5 exercises are used to also teach core activation. Normally, TVA activation (or drawing in") is taught separately. It can be taught separately, but I have found that some helpful cues including "touch" or "poking" the abs during movements, makes the client think.

Heel in contact with floor

Usually, client with tight lower leg muscles will have an "unsteady" placement foot. It can also mean an immobile ankle on that leg. What we want to accomplish is making the client understand that "drive" should come from the glutes and hips.

Can knee go over foot?

This is a tough one to explain. Next time you go upstairs, take a look and tell me if your knee goes over your foot? Mechanically, the knee can go over the front of the foot, but we are taught just the opposite. However, in an efficient moving body, it is acceptable because everything else is working right. In GPCs, it can be a tough call. If the heel placement is correct and "drive" is initiated "thru" the heel, then there should be no pain in the quadriceps tendon, if and when, the knee goes over the toe.

Forward leg is lead leg

This is easily cued by instructing the client to imagine raising their bodies on the concentric motion straight upwards rather than forward.

3.) Step-Up

How high to place the steps?

Typically, start lower than a 90 degree angle from the knee to the hip joints. A sedentary GPC, who will try to raise the knee to 90 degrees to place the foot on top of the step, will usually demonstrate back extension and poor psoas strength due to hip flexor tightness or simply weakness. Also, back stance leg will be weak from no glute activation and gastroc weakness. So start a step lower than 90 degrees.

Heel in contact with step

Same as for the lunge. The heel must be cued to engage the hamstrings and glutes.

Leave foot on step or "march"?

Typically, I like to leave the foot on the step. Once the client has established some conditioning, we perform a "marching" step-up. However, during the "marching", cues are missed and form is sacrificed. "Marching" can also be used for conditioning.

4.) Push-Up

Form a Table Top

We want to avoid the "clothesline effect" discussed in Part 1 here, so in order to visually cue the client, we ask them to conform their body into a table-top. That is what we want...initially we won't get that, but now the visual goal has been established.

Watch protruding neck/chin

Tight neck muscles and weak scapulae will elicit the deviated form like "jutting" chin or "protruding abs". This is a sign of weakness and failed neural coordination. This is why modified versions of the push-up are advocated.

Master modified before going to standard

Usually, the taller the person, the more "clothesline effect" you will see. This is because of the long lever arm the body creates and when accompanied by overall weakness, they lose form. They may be able to knock out 15-30 reps, but we are talking poor execution.

34+ Variations

The push-up can be varied in so many ways using small, inexpensive equipment. It is a fun exercise and perfect for upper body development. That is why it is so important to maximize perfect form, so that the advanced variations can be enjoyed.

6.) Ab Crunch

Do not pin the feet.

We want to establish abdominal trunk flexion without creating momentum. Therefore, we do not want to provide artificial leverage. Have the client lie supine with hands behind the head, keeping the elbows “open”.

Flex the trunk on 10-20 degrees

No need to pull the neck here. We want to pull the trunk forward using integrated stabilization between the pelvis, calves, and lower back. It is important that the feet stay flat on the ground and the knees are bent. Make sure the client does not allow knees to “bow out”. If this happens, place a ball or yoga block in between the knees and ask for them to “lock up” the object. The hips must be able to stabilize even though they are known for mobility.

Place your hand at the client’s lower back

I have also used this cue to help clients understand the role of the pelvis and transverse abdominals in supine positions. By placing my hand at the lordotic curve and instructing them to “press” into it, they can engage the proper muscles. If you feel uncomfortable placing your hand there because of client’s sweat, client is ticklish, or you simply feel uncomfortable doing so., use a crumpled piece of paper.

If the neck starts to jut....

If you see the neck muscles begin to engage relentlessly, always bring the client back to the instruction of placing pressure on your hand.

Understanding that these exercises are not the “end all—be all” to an exercise program is crucial when implementing progressions. These exercises relate to some of the positions the body conforms to: supine, prone, staggered stance, parallel stance, and locomotion. In GPC’s, I like to introduce twisting and rotation in a Phase 2 Auxiliary Exercises program 5 to 6 weeks later. Why? I want to build a solid foundation of sagittal plane work that promotes overall strength, increases mobility and bodyweight control.

All these exercises and movements are detailed with lecture and practical in my video series. For more information on the videos, please visit: www.standapartfitness.com/wst_page4.html



“Advanced Strength Training Skills – Pt.1



“Advanced Strength Training Skills –Pt.2”



“Stronger Shoulders”



“Free the Hips”



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, YMCA's, and Healthtrax, Inc.

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