

GET A GRIP



**A PRACTICAL PRIMER
ON GRIP STRENGTH AND
ENDURANCE TRAINING...**

AND MORE

BURR



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HOW TO GET A GRIP



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ON GRIP STRENGTH AND
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GET A GRIP: A Practical Primer on Grip Strength and Endurance Training... and More is published by HFGT Publications in conjunction with Artless Dodges, Inc.

Get a Grip: A Practical Primer on Grip Strength and
Endurance Training... and More
Copyright © 2019 Scott Burr
ISBN-13 978-0-9907227-2-4
ISBN-10 0-9907227-2-4

Published by HFGT Publications
in partnership with The Artless Dodges Press
Cleveland, Ohio
www.HoldFastGripTech.com
www.TheArtlessDodgesPress.com

*Layout and cover design by The Artless Dodges Press.
Photos by Jason Zakrajsek and the author.*

READ THIS FIRST

The instruction and information contained in this manual are no substitute for hands-on, in-person training with an experienced professional. It is advised that before you attempt anything shown or described in this manual you consult with a qualified trainer. Hold Fast Grip Tech and Scott Burr accept no responsibility for any injury or death resulting from you attempting anything you read in this manual.

Always consult your physician before beginning any exercise program. The general information contained in this manual is not intended to diagnose any medical condition or to replace the information available from your healthcare provider. It is advised that you consult with your healthcare professional to design an exercise program that is appropriate to your current health and fitness level.

If you experience any pain, discomfort, or difficulty when performing these exercises, stop and consult your healthcare provider.

In this text I employ the universal masculine. This was not done with the intention to slight, marginalize, or offend anyone. I sincerely hope that it will not detract from this manual's usefulness to you.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Back in college I had a friend I'll call Disco. Before college Disco was a competitive rock climber on the youth climbing circuit. If the term "competitive rock climber" makes you think of those events where two climbers race to the top of an overhanging wall, the winner arriving just milliseconds ahead of the loser, think again. In the type of events in which Disco competed, climbers enter a climbing gym that has been newly outfitted with routes and boulder problems (short routes that can be protected with a crash pad, rather than a rope and harness) of varying degrees of difficulty; competitors accumulate points by successfully climbing routes, with points deducted for each failed attempt. At the end of the open period the finalists—those who have climbed the most and most difficult problems—are moved to isolation while a handful of final, harder problems are set; once allowed back into the gym, these finalists have a limited amount of time to work on these new—and, again, *exceptionally* difficult—problems. The winner in each age and gender category is the climber who successfully climbs the most problems in the fewest number of attempts.

All of which is to say that these competitions are an incredible test of strength, stamina, route-reading, problem-solving, composure, and grit.

I was a climber before college, too—but I was decidedly NOT a competitive climber on the youth climbing circuit. I wasn't even close. In fact, my "rock climbing" consisted primarily of me scrambling around the shale cliffs that dotted our local parks system with my feet crammed into my dad's old climbing shoes from the '80s and my Nalgene clipped to my backpack with a genuine Black Diamond carabiner. I didn't know the Matterhorn from a hole in the ground, didn't know Yosemite National Park from Yosemite Sam. Still, none of that seemed to matter much: at that time, in the small Midwestern town where I grew up, climbers were few and far between, and being one of any skill or experience level automatically placed you in the collective consciousness alongside Yvon Chouinard and Sylvester Stallone in that movie with the bolt gun. Just being *interested* in rock climbing—rather than whatever "normal" high school kids in that place and of that era were interested in (Nelly? South Park? Dawson's Creek?)—made you a vaguely impressive outlier, and as a quasi-alienated high school kid who had a hard time making friends, I didn't hate that. I wasn't mad about the regard that "being a rock climber"—however ill-suited or self-ascribed that identifier was—seemed to earn me among my peers.

... So imagine the shock it was to my fragile teenage sense of self when I got to college in Colorado and discovered that being a rock climber—let alone a pretty mediocre one—didn't earn me much regard, didn't

make me anything special: discovered that, if anything, it made me achingly *unremarkable*. Because out in Colorado it seemed like *everybody* climbed rocks. These kids had been cragging with their parents since before they could even remember, strapped into backpacks and tethered into kiddie body harnesses. In a matter of moments I went from being the only kid I knew who could tie in and belay to being one of dozens, if not hundreds.

Which was the point, right? To get out of Ohio and be among people who shared my interests in an environment conducive to my chosen pursuits? Sure it was. Or at least I thought it was. But somehow it hadn't quite occurred to me that joining the crowd meant running the risk of getting lost in the crowd, of becoming just another face.

What's a young man to do, when he finds himself confronted by circumstances such as these? When his desire to be exceptional runs headlong into the reality of his mediocrity? Just relax? Make some friends? Enjoy being there? Open yourself to the new experience? Not this guy! That feeling of being lost in the crowd lit a fire under me, and for six months I poured every spare ounce of youthful energy I had pumping through my eighteen-year-old heart into making myself a better* climber—a climber amongst climbers. I invested in grip strength-training devices and dedicated myself to workout regimens; I got a job at the school's climbing gym and haunted it before, after, and—let's be hon-

est—during class; I leaned out on a diet of coffee, dry tuna, and PowerBars. I did everything I could think of, and I gave it my all.

*AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Anyone reading this who knew me during this era might be inclined to put in that what I am here referring to as "better" might actually be better stated as "more committed"; as in, if I couldn't be the best, then I could at least be willing to push it farther than other people. In part this included a lot of overtraining—which I will discuss in greater depth at different points in this manual—but it should not go without saying that it also included me doing a lot of really, really sketchy shit that to this day makes me wince when I think about it. Which compels me to emphasize the point that SAFETY in any endeavor, whether on a rock, on the mat, or in the weight room, for yourself and the other participants whose experience is impacted by your behavior, with whom you come in contact or with whom you train, MUST be the #1 priority at all times.

...And I got fucking nowhere. If anything, between overtraining-related injuries, poor diet, and a shitty attitude, I got worse. That first year of college remains in my memory only as a blur of hunger and panic: that I wasn't getting better; that other climbers who had started the year at my skill level or below it were surpassed me, climbing routes and boulder problems that

I just couldn't; that I wasn't exceptional, and was therefore forgettable and worthless.

Which brings us back to Disco. One night, toward the end of our freshman year, Disco and I went for a run. Disco had been focused on his classes for the better part of the year, but was now dipping his toe back into the climbing scene. Despite this layoff, he could still climb stuff that I couldn't even understand. To make matters worse, Disco was unwaveringly helpful, patient, and very, very nice. Which is probably why he offered to put up with me on a training run in the first place.

We ran a couple of miles, over to a local high school's track, where Disco said there was a pull-up bar. Knowing our destination, and never one to miss a chance to implement a little self-directed training modification ("If you can't climb impressive then at least train impressive!"), I brought along my new set of homemade "Eagle Loops." These were (and probably still are) a training device primarily marketed to martial arts practitioners: a loop of climbing webbing is folded back on itself and sewn in such a way as to make a big loop attached to a row of four small loops, each big enough for a finger; this section of small loops would be passed through the big loop to form a girth hitch around a tree branch, pull up bar, monkey bar, etc. The idea was that these individual finger loops created an individual finger load and—the thinking went—an accordant strengthening benefit (though, after a lot of

time with my own homemade version of the device, I confess that I'm skeptical... But that's a topic for another discussion).

Arriving at the track, I promptly fitted my homemade Eagle Loops to the horizontal bar. Disco proposed a pyramid training protocol: he would do one rep while I rested, then I would do one rep while he rested, then he would do two reps while I rested, and so on until we reached the decided-upon goal, at which point we would work our way back down.

Fired up and full of piss and vinegar, when it came my turn, I inserted just my middle fingers into just the one loop on each of the respective setups and proceeded to fire off my reps—first one, then two, then three—in this fashion.

It was at about this point, however, that Disco stopped us.

"Jesus Christ," he said. "What are you doing?"

I explained about the Eagle Loops, about the idea behind the training. "Here," I said, "try them. They're good. And you can definitely do it."

He looked at the loops, looked at me, and then he laughed and shook his head. "I would rip my fucking fingers off," he said.

We finished our pyramid, me using the loops and Disco using the straight bar. And then we ran back to school, where in the coming weeks Disco continued to out-climb me, despite his refusal to try the Eagle Loops.

—

I open with this story to illustrate the point that, in any endeavor, there are things supplemental training can do and there are things it can't do. A high-skill activity like rock climbing or Judo or Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu is comprised of many elements, only one of which is pure physical strength. So if you've come here looking for a one-shot answer to why you keep getting tapped out on the mats, or why you keep failing on your long-standing redpoint project, then I'd advise you to stop right here. *This book is about helping you make your grip stronger.* Period. That's it.

Later in this book—in the section ASSIMILATING THE MATERIAL—I talk in greater depth about the difference between strength and skill. For now, though, let me suggest that you take a second look at yourself and the specific failures you may have had that have prompted you to buy this book in the first place. Supplemental training is meant to be just that, and comforting yourself with training gains when those gains don't transfer into your chosen activity is a dead end.

All of which is to say: Before you do any of the things

that I suggest in this book, go back to class. Drill some arm bars. Do some more *uchi komi*. Go climb some 5.8s as cleanly as you possibly can, picking every foothold with paintbrush precision. For most of you seeking improvement, that's going to be a much, much better use of your time and energy than anything I outline in the following chapters.

Still here? You already bought the book, right? Might as well see what it has to say.

In that case:

This book is intended as a low-tech, low-cost, from-the-ground-up primer on grip-strength training. If you are more experienced in your training, I'm sure that you will find some parts of this book rudimentary. Understand that it is necessary and useful, when writing a manual like this one, to create a baseline of shared understanding before introducing any of the more involved training ideas. Also, while these sections may not be relevant to you, the information they contain may prove extremely useful to another reader. So bear with me as we get through some necessary groundwork. Or, if you really can't stand it, skip ahead.

I feel it is also appropriate to mention, at this point, that for some readers working backwards may be the best approach. Some of what follows tends toward the theoretical, and may be better understood as explanation for and illumination of the programming de-

scribed in the SAMPLE WORKOUTS section. So feel free to skip to the end, play with the programs presented, and then return to the pertinent explanations as they feel useful.

Understand that this book is also intended as a "poor man's guide" to grip strength training: the exercises in this book require little, cheap, and/or easy-to-find-and-construct-for-yourself equipment. If you're looking for fancy and/or specialized gadgets that will help you push through plateaus and take things to the next level, check out the SHOP at www.HoldFastGripTech.com. That's where a lot of my training ideas become training realities.

It should also be said that this book is not a scientific study, and the contents and conclusions are not based on evidence gathered via a scientific methodology. The contents and conclusions presented in this book are the result of my own training, study, and experience, and that of my coaches, clients, and Judo and Jiu-Jitsu athletes. I do, however, feel strongly that this book presents a safe, efficient, and effective approach to grip strength training.

That being said, this book is not intended as a replacement for in-person training with a qualified professional. Understand that if you undertake anything you see in this book, you do so at your own risk.

Good? Agreed? All right, great. Let's do this.