Bodyweight-Only **Program Design**

OPEX

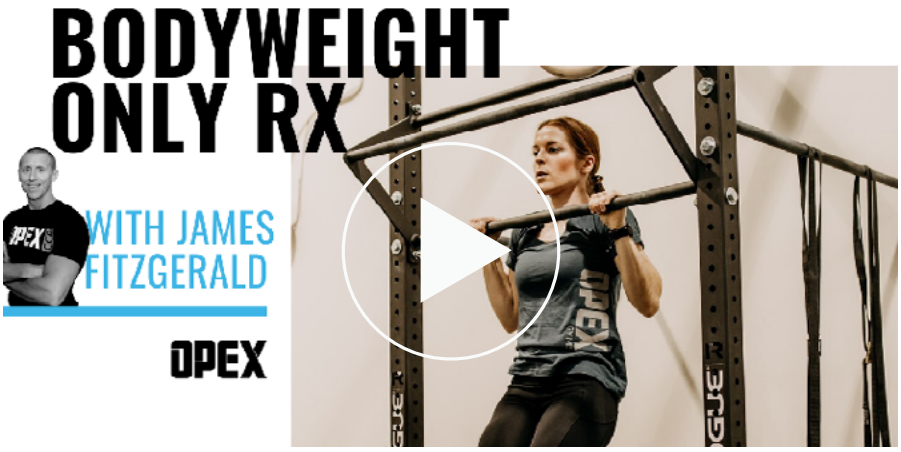
Introduction

Bodyweight training may be a great option for clients who don't have access to gym equipment, but it must be programmed with precision and care to produce results safely.

What's more, while air squats, push ups, lunges, and burpees performed in a circuit may make for a sweaty workout, bodyweight workouts will only create long-term progress if they follow foundational program design principles.

The principles of prescribing bodyweight training outlined in this guide are based on OPEX Founder James FitzGerald's latest Knowledge Series seminar, a monthly webinar that is exclusive to OPEX Coaching Certificate Program (CCP) coaches. With so many clients training at home, we're sharing the knowledge every coach needs to prescribe effective bodyweight-only workouts.

Read the guide and watch the bonus clip from the seminar by clicking the video below.



Understanding the Dose-Response of Bodyweight Training

To design bodyweight workouts that create results, you have to understand the dose-response, that is the stimulus or outcome, of each workout.

Three factors should be considered when determining the dose-response: 1. Intention, 2. Modality, and 3. Person.

To define the Intention, ask yourself "what is the goal of this program and why is my client working out?"

To define the Modality, ask yourself "what type of exercise is my client doing?" In this case, it will be bodyweight exercise only, which will put clear restrictions on what you can program.

To define the Person, ask yourself "who am I programming for and what are their abilities, skill level, and training age?"

When you understand the *who* (Person), *what* (Modality), and *why* (Intention) of the program you're writing, you can control the *dose-response*, and ultimately the adaptation and results that occur from it.

What is bodyweight training?

To program bodyweight workouts effectively, it is important to understand what bodyweight training is and what the limitations inside of it are.

Bodyweight training primarily involves closed-chain activities with **relative strength (**strength against bodyweight) and **strength endurance** (the ability to perform repetitions at submaximal loads) as the main limitations.

Bodyweight training has **low variability** because of the lack of access to equipment and novel means to perform movement patterns. This may mean that you prescribe a lot of repetitions of the same types of contractions. This can become problematic if poor movement patterns are repeated for a high number of repetitions.

Bodyweight training also lacks **intensity**, true maximal effort, as you do not have access to external loading. This means that especially for stronger clients, strength endurance efforts may be extended into metabolic efforts that become glycolytic, meaning they begin to use the anaerobic lactic energy system. This is problematic as glycolytic training is one of the best ways to lower immunity and create negative metabolic adaptations, teaching the body to utilize sugars for fuel.

Principles of Bodyweight Program Design

1 Full-Body Resistance Training

For bodyweight training sessions, it is best practice to program full body resistance (FBR), that is, to include upper, lower, and core movement patterns.

The 6 movement patterns and examples of each are:

Squat

Air Squat, Wall Sit, Cyclist Squat

Bend

Glute Bridge, Hamstring Walkout, Hip Thrust

Lunge

Reverse Lunge, Split Squat, Rear Foot Elevated Split Squat

Push

Push Up, Dip, Decline Push Up

Pull

Reverse Scapular Push Up, Prone Lift-Offs, Towel Row

Core

Plank, Side Plank, Bear Crawl

2 Balance Mechanical and Metabolic Fatigue

Within each training session, try to create mechanical and metabolic fatigue for movement patterns. Mechanical fatigue efforts are usually more intense contractions that should last 10-20 seconds and cause mechanical damage to muscle fibers. Metabolic efforts are lower intensity contractions that can be extended out longer, with fatigue setting in when the muscle fibers can no longer be fueled by ATP (energy).

An example of mechanical fatigue for the Bend pattern is 5 reps of an **Eccentric Nordic Raise**. An example of metabolic fatigue for the Bend pattern is 60 seconds of **Single Leg Hip Thrusts**.

An example of mechanical fatigue for the Push pattern is 3 reps of an **Eccentric Single-Arm Push Up**. An example of metabolic fatigue for the Push pattern is 25 **Clapping Push Ups**.

Some clients will not be able to express mechanical tension in bodyweight exercises, especially those with either a very low or very high training age. In this case, it is appropriate to prescribe only metabolic fatigue bodyweight activities that are higher time under tension.

3 Progression

There are three key ways to progress bodyweight training.

Increase volume over time, adding repetitions each session.

For example:

Workout 1: Push Up @20X0, 8-10 reps x 3 sets; rest 90 seconds
Workout 2: Push Up @20X0, 9-11 reps x 3 sets; rest 90 seconds
Workout 3: Push Up @20X0, 10-12 reps x 3 sets; rest 90 seconds
Workout 4: Push Up @20X0, 11-13 reps x 3 sets; rest 90 seconds

Increase the speed of the contractions from motor control to strength endurance to dynamic activities.

For example:

Front Leaning Rest

↓

Push Up **@3010**

↓

Push Up **@1010**

↓

Clapping Push Up

Adjust tempo and increase the eccentric, or lowering, phase of an exercise.

For example:

Workout 1: Towel Hamstring Curl @50X0, 4-6 reps x 3 sets; rest 90 seconds

Workout 2: Towel Hamstring Curl @60X0, 4-6 reps x 3 sets; rest 90 seconds

Workout 3: Towel Hamstring Curl @70X0, 4-6 reps x 3 sets; rest 90 seconds

Workout 4: Towel Hamstring Curl @80X0, 4-6 reps x 3 sets; rest 90 seconds

4 Training Split

For the majority of clients, stick with a simple training split and focus on consistency in training. Alternate full-body resistance training one day with aerobic training the next.

Monday: FBR

Tuesday: Aerobic intervals

Wednesday: FBR

Thursday: Active Recovery

Friday: FBR

Saturday: Aerobic intervals

Sunday: Rest

5 Honor Sustainability

High-intensity, unsustainable bodyweight circuits are a lower order prescription for five key reasons:

- **They do not create sustainable results**
- **They lower immunity and resilience**
- **Drops in power can create poor movement patterns and compensations**
- **They are not functional**
- **They create cortisol junkies and poor behaviors around exercise**

Design bodyweight workouts that are within your client's capabilities and progress them gradually over time. Prescribe measures to ensure repeatability by tracking scores, including rest periods, and avoiding "for time" workouts.

RX this (based on each client's ability to maintain power with assigned work rest):

Clapping Push Ups, max repeatable reps x 4 sets; rest 60 seconds

Jump Squats, 20 reps x 4 sets; rest 60 seconds

Reverse Plank, 60 seconds x 4 sets; rest 60 seconds

Not this (where power decreases each round):

4 Round For Time

20 **Clapping Push Ups**

20 **Jump Squats**

60 seconds **Reverse Plank**

Next Steps

In this guide and Knowledge Series Seminar, we explored principles of designing bodyweight workouts. The key to program design is controlling the dose-response of every workout you write. However, fitness success is about far more than just program design. To get results you also need to understand principles of assessment, nutrition, and behavior. For an in-depth exploration into the principles and skills every coach needs to possess, sign up for our free course, the **Coach's Toolkit.**

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