

A black and white photograph of a person's hands gripping a gymnastic ring. The person is wearing a dark t-shirt with a graphic that includes the word "FITNESS". The title "FUNCTIONAL FITNESS: GYMNASTICS SKILL PROGRESSION" is overlaid on the image in blue and white text.

FUNCTIONAL FITNESS: GYMNASTICS SKILL PROGRESSION

OPEX

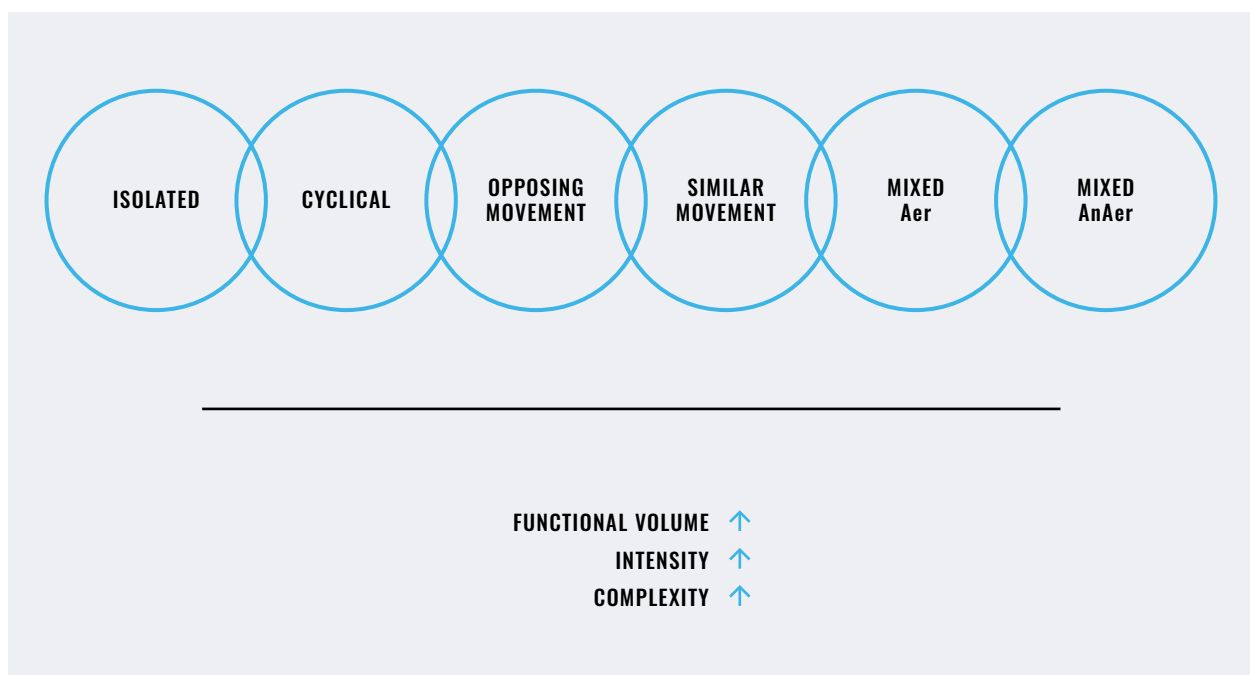
So your client wants to do a muscle-up... Now what?

For any functional fitness athlete, advanced gymnastics skills like butterfly pull-ups, handstands, and muscle-ups are an essential priority in program design. But progressing them is not as simple as starting the clock, jumping on the bar, and hoping for the best.

Read on to learn the OPEX principles of skill development, and see how to take popular movements from isolated skill work to performing them in metabolic conditioning.

With the right mindset and smart program design, you can intelligently and safely develop gymnastics skills for athletes that want to maximize their performance.

SKILL PROGRESSION PRINCIPLES



Skill progression for any movement that you want to perform in a mixed modal setting follows a standard format.

As a rule of thumb, it's essential to be able to perform the required volume (repetitions) of a gymnastics skill on its own and with no metabolic challenge, prior to performing it in a workout. This is known as **functional volume**.

For example, if you want to perform a workout of 5 rounds of 10 pull-ups, 10 push-ups, and 10 calories on the Assault Bike, then the functional volume required is 50 pull-ups and 50 push-ups. At each stage in the skill progression, it's important to achieve and maintain this functional volume.

As you set out to progress a skill, make sure you first define what the functional volume is for your client. This is often determined by the repetitions required for success at different levels of competition.

STEP 1: ISOLATED

Build volume of the skill by itself with the rest needed to perform it again, maintaining high quality and without metabolic fatigue. Add volume in the form of reps or sets until functional volume is achieved.

STEP 2: CYCLICAL

Add a metabolic and breathing challenge by pairing the skill with cyclical exercise, such as an Assault Bike or rower at a slower pace. Ensure that as global fatigue sets in, quality of the skill remains high. Add volume until functional volume is achieved. Keep in mind, sometimes cyclical modalities can also act as similar movements, which should only be paired later in the progression. For example, rowing and muscle-ups or Assault Bike and pistols challenge similar movements, which would cause specific muscle fatigue, and not the desired global fatigue.

STEP 3: WITH OPPOSING MOVEMENT

Pair the skill with an opposing/complementary movement. This means selecting an exercise that challenges a different movement pattern and muscle groups to the skill. For example, pairing a toes-to-bar with an air squat. Add volume until functional volume is achieved.

STEP 4: WITH SIMILAR MOVEMENT

Pair the skill with a similar/non-complementary movement. This means selecting an exercise that challenges similar movement patterns and muscle groups to the skill. For example, pairing a pull-up with a rope climb. Muscle endurance and mechanics make progression at this stage challenging, and months to years of development may be required to achieve functional volume.

STEP 5: MIXED AEROBIC SETTING

Now that muscle endurance and skill acquisition have been developed in non-metabolic settings, it is time to move the skill into an aerobic environment. At this stage, the skill can be introduced in formats like AMRAPs or Rounds for Time, performed at sustainable paces and paired with additional patterns of movement. Again, functional volume must be achieved before progressing beyond sustainability. Keep in mind that all skills inside the mixed aerobic setting must be taken through the skill progression.

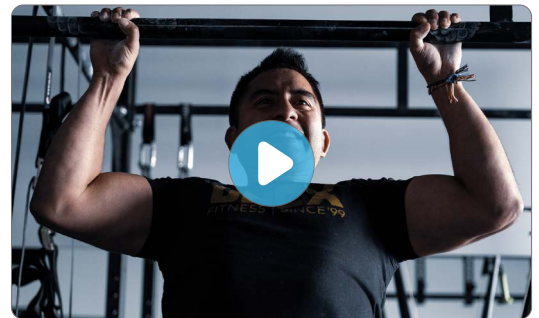
STEP 6: MIXED ANAEROBIC SETTING

In this final step, the skill can now be expressed in mixed modal anaerobic training settings. Here, the skill will be performed at an unsustainable level of work, with a large amount of rest required between efforts to maintain pace. Again, functional volume must be achieved in this unsustainable setting.

SKILL EXPRESSION

Now that the skill has been progressed through all 6 steps, it can be expressed in the competitive environment, with the intention to hold on to the highest possible output for as long as possible and to achieve the best score possible.

Watch this [LearnRx video](#) to see principles of skill progression applied to program design for the Chest-to-Bar Butterfly Pull-Up.



SKILL PROGRESSION IN PRACTICE: THE RING MUSCLE-UP

Now that you understand the theory of skill progression, it's time to see it in practice with one of the most coveted skills in functional fitness, the ring muscle-up.

In the example below, we will progress an athlete from being able to perform sets of 2-3 muscle-ups in isolation to being able to express a functional volume of 30 repetitions in a mixed modal competitive setting.

At each step, the athlete may spend weeks or months progressing towards functional volume, increasing intensity, and increasing complexity of the skills with which the muscle-up is paired.

STEP 1: ISOLATED

Every 90 seconds x 5+ sets

2-3 Ring Muscle-Ups

*adding reps/sets until 30 reps are achieved

After 30 reps are achieved, reducing rest time:

Every 60 seconds x 5+ sets

2-3 Ring Muscle-Ups

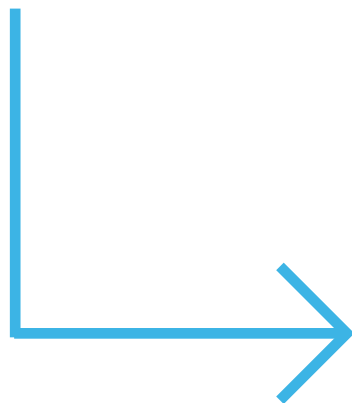
*adding reps/sets until 30 reps are achieved

After 30 reps are achieved, increasing reps per set:

Every 60-90 seconds x 4+ sets

4-6 Ring Muscle-Ups

*adding reps/sets until 30 reps are achieved



STEP 2: CYCLICAL

30 second Assault Bike @ sustained pace

4-6 Ring Muscle-Ups

Rest 60 seconds

x 5-8 sets

*adding reps/sets until 30 reps are achieved

STEP 3: WITH OPPOSING MOVEMENT

Alternating EMOM x 5-8 sets

Minute 1) 4-6 Ring Muscle-Ups

Minute 2) 6 Back Squats @ 65% 1RM

*adding reps/sets until 30 reps are achieved

STEP 4: WITH SIMILAR MOVEMENT

Alternating EMOM x 5-8 sets

Minute 1) 4-6 Ring Muscle-Ups

Minute 2) 10 Toes to Bar

*adding reps/sets until 30 reps are achieved

STEP 5: MIXED AEROBIC SETTING

5 Rounds for Time @ sustained pace

15 Wall Balls, 20#

6 Ring Muscle-Ups

15 cal Assault Bike

*maintaining even times per round

This is one example of the ring muscle-up in an aerobic setting, but it is important to expose the athlete to a wide variety of opposing and similar movement pairings to uncover any potential limitations.

There are a range of different ways to program mixed aerobic work, from AMRAPs to Rounds to Chippers. Understanding principles of metabolic conditioning will help you pick the best one for your athlete. Learn our 4 Cs framework of metcon progression in this [FREE LearnRx course](#).



STEP 6: MIXED ANAEROBIC SETTING

For Time @ very hard effort
8 Thrusters, 95#
6 Ring Muscle-Ups
20 cal Assault Bike
Rest 9 minutes
x 4-5 sets



SKILL EXPRESSION

For Time @ game day pace
150 Wall Balls, 20#
90 Double Unders
30 Ring Muscle-Ups

Progressing gymnastics skills is a slow and steady process that requires patience from both the coach and the athlete. The process of acquiring each skill will not always be linear and will at times be more circular in nature, as each step is consolidated along the way.

What's more, every individual you coach will adapt at a different rate, have a range of movement and skill limitations, and require a personalized progression that considers where they are starting from.

In the [OPEX Coaching Certificate Program \(CCP\)](#), you'll learn the OPEX Method of personalized fitness coaching, so that you can assess each client's starting point and apply proven principles of exercise progression to build a strong base of quality movement. If you're ready to write smarter, safer programs designed with long-term success in mind, then take the first step and apply today.

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