

Getting Your First Muscle Up

By Dan MacDougald

There are lots of folks who can do impressive numbers of pullups and dips who cannot do a muscle up. They fail in the transition from pullup to dip. Learning that transition is the key to your first muscle up. A very, very small range of motion is involved in the transition, but if you don't have strength there you won't succeed. If you do have it, you can do a muscle up with as few as 1 or 2 dips, as I can attest. So focus first on how to build the strength in that transition area.

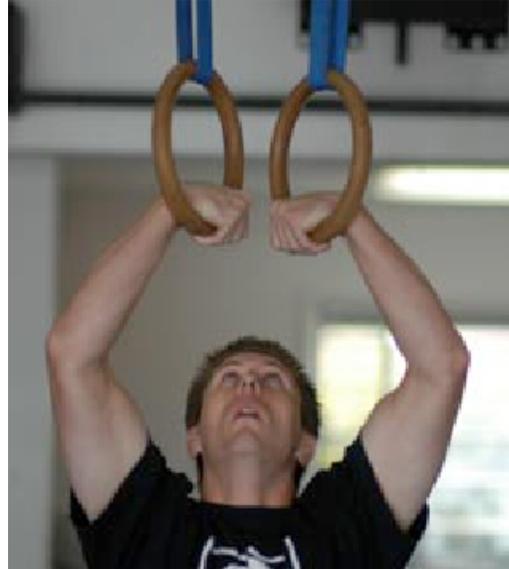
Your pull ups and dips in warmup and in all workouts involving pullups or dips should be FULL RANGE OF MOTION. For the pullup this means arms fully extended, shoulder to ears at the bottom, and hands to chest at the top. For the dip it means shoulders well below elbows at the bottom and arms fully extended, shoulders down at the top. It is especially important to your future muscle up that your dips go as low as possible, because doing them this way trains strength in the transition area. They should look like this:



You can have 100 pullups and 100 dips and still not get a muscle up if your pullup and dip numbers are *artificially inflated* by doing them incorrectly. And if you don't do them with full ROM, you're doing them wrong. You need to form the mental and character habit of not counting the repetition unless it is full ROM. Get each rep right or don't count it. Use whatever level of assistance from rubber bands or other means and get whatever rest you need to do every single rep through absolutely full ROM. You are cheating yourself if you sacrifice form to get a better time. Get your form right first, then you can start pushing for better times. In the beginning you'll be much slower than the folks who cut corners. In the end, you'll be way ahead if you don't cheat.

Learn the kipping pullup on rings. This is different from the kip on the bar. If you are very strong, you can get a muscle up without kipping, but if you can learn to kip on the rings, you can take a short cut to your muscle up, and work from there to doing one without a kip. The pullup portion needs to be ballistic into and through the transition from pullup to dip, and you can do this by kipping or by explosive muscle power, or a combination. Build your explosive, ballistic pullup power with weighted pullups and clapping pullups, and kipping pullups. Whenever you have a heavy pullup workout, try to do as many as possible on the rings instead of on the bar, kip them, and you will get your muscle up sooner. The kip helps you explode through the transition, but it also does other things that are very important. The kip lays you out almost horizontally during the pull so that you are pulling to a lower point on your chest, well below your shoulders, and this gets you on top of the rings. It allows you to engage powerful muscles in your torso that don't come into play as much in dead hang pullups. The reaction swing backward from the forward swing of the kip also helps put you over the rings.

Learn the False Grip. It's absolutely vital, and it's very hard at first. Once you have the full ROM strength, the false grip then becomes the key element. It involves setting your wrist bone on top of the ring and pulling from there. Start by practicing hanging with false grip, with assistance from your legs on the ground, building up to full body weight for a few seconds, then longer and longer. Then do false grip pullups. For more on the muscle up and specifics of the false grip, see Tyler Hass' website, <http://www.powerathletesmag.com/pages/muscleup.htm>, and Issue 3 of the CrossFit Journal, available for purchase at www.crossfit.com. Here are pictures, courtesy of CrossFit, of how to set the false grip.



When pulling up with the false grip, keep your hands as close together as possible, and try keep your elbows directly under your hands. It's not entirely possible to do this, but the further your elbows stray out it the more difficult it is. Keep them tight.

Once these elements are starting to come into place, start doing Jumping Muscle Ups and Negatives. Lower the rings or stand on a box, set the false grip and jump through the transition. This will help you get a feel for the transition, but most importantly it will allow you to do negatives, a vital aspect of all gymnastic strength progressions. From the fully extended support position above the rings lower yourself, and go as slowly as possible through the transition. At first you may collapse in the transition area, but very quickly you will start to slow it down, and soon you'll be able to stop and reverse direction from a very, very deep dip position. When you can do that, you'll have it.