

# THE PULL-UP: AN OVERLOOKED BUT IMPORTANT EXERCISE FOR THE TACTICAL OFFICER

By Cyndi Williams

**A** SWAT team is called upon to tactically resolve the most dangerous of situations in law enforcement, such as a barricaded gunman with hostages, high-risk search warrants and officer rescues. In most of these high-risk responses, there are several tactical resolution options that can be employed, such as a slow and deliberate entry, a dynamic entry or a breach-and-hold call out method.

On a tactical deployment or training day, the tactical officer must be prepared to endure long hours outfitted in a 50-pound vest, shouldering a rifle or lugging around a 40-pound ram. The strenuous activities attached to the duties of tactical team members require officers to be physically fit. Most SWAT teams have physical fitness requirements that an officer has to pass and maintain to be an active team member.

Many SWAT teams, however, do not use the pull-up as part of their physical fitness requirement. Good physical conditioning is critical for the maintenance of agility, cardiovascular power, endurance, speed, stamina and strength, all of which a tactical officer should have. The pull-up is one of the few exercises that can improve both upper body and core strength, yet it is widely disliked by officers and civilians alike.

## **PULL-UPS AND TACTICAL OPERATIONS**

Total body strength is important for a tactical officer, yet back strength has proven to be equally (if not more) important than other muscle groups. The back muscles play a supportive role when 50 pounds of tactical gear are being worn. Carrying a long gun and maintaining a ready position primarily uses your shoulder and back muscles.

Whether during a tactical deployment or training scenarios, most tactical officers have experienced the necessity of pulling oneself over an 8-foot wall;



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pulling an individual to safety; lifting and carrying heavy equipment or individuals; and, more recently, pulling an officer onto a moving vehicle — all in full tactical gear.

SWAT teams may also practice waterborne operations in states with access to bodies of water. Swimming against water currents, water-casting and hoisting an individual out of the ocean onto a vessel may be operational requirements, all of which require strong back muscles.

Murphy's Law can enter a tactical operation when least expected. Good physical conditioning is critical in the successful execution of situations presented, especially the unforeseen ones.



**The pull-up exercise can be one of the most valuable upper body strength exercises done to enhance power and physical skills performance for a tactical officer.**



## **PULL-UPS AND MUSCLE GROUPS**

As a personal trainer, fitness advocate, gym-goer and tactical police officer, I can attest that the lack of attention given to the pull-up exercise by police officers and gym-goers alike is surprising. The pull-up exercise can be one of the most valuable upper body strength exercises done to enhance power and physical skills performance for a tactical officer (and anyone in general). The possibilities where such strength could be needed to perform in a tactical environment can be endless.

A couple of challenges reported by my gym clients and co-workers included the inability to pull their body weight and the exhausting nature of the exercise. The pull-up can be very discouraging, especially if one discovers that it cannot be completed without assistance. Pulling your own body weight with underdeveloped muscles, or muscles not used to working in unity to complete the movement, can be very taxing. Hand grip placement, whether supinated or pronated, can decrease or increase the difficulty of the exercise, as can the spacing between hand grips.

If you are unable to pull your body weight, it takes time to develop the muscles to work together and lift your weight, especially if you are carrying a few extra pounds. The latissimus dorsi muscles (lats), which run from underneath the armpit across the back and angle toward the spine, are the primary muscle groups used while performing the pull-up. As you pull yourself up, the lats (with the assistance of your biceps) allow that motion to happen. The rhomboids, which connect the shoulder to the spine, are another set of muscles that substantially benefit from the pull-up.

Secondary muscles that are affected by the exercise are the shoulder muscles, upper and lower arm muscles,



hand muscles and abdominal muscles. A strong back or the lack thereof indirectly affects grip strength. Shooting, pulling, holding and squeezing are all affected by grip and thus, the back. A strong grip uses hand muscles, arm muscles and back muscles. For example, during a ground fight, pulling a violent suspect into a position of submission, or gripping the suspect's hands to apply handcuffs, relies on decent grip strength.

### INCORPORATING THE PULL-UP INTO YOUR ROUTINE

The pull-up exercise not only serves as a staple for a powerful upper body, but it is a convenient exercise that can be done outside the gym environment. Just place a pull-up bar in the doorframe of your home or office and you are ready to go. Outside your home or gym, you can use the monkey bars of a nearby park or even a sturdy tree branch that could support your weight.

To exercise a proper pull-up, begin from a hang position, allowing your arms to be locked straight out. As you pull, bring your chest to the bar, tilting your chin slightly back. Your chin should rise just slightly above the bar.



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Release back down to the start position with full extension of your arms. Each pull-up should be slow and controlled.

If you struggle with these, I recommend you have an objective in mind. You can set a goal for each variety of pull-up, including wide grip, close grip, overhand grip and underhand grip (called chin-ups). A wide grip targets the muscle fibers closer to your spine.

The close grip method targets the outermost fibers of your lats. Behind-the-neck pull-ups as well as wider grip stances places a lot of stress on your shoulders, so use caution if you suffer from shoulder injuries.

When setting your goal, look at the resources available to you. You can have a spotter assist you, use a weight-assisted pull-up machine, start with the



kiping pull-up (using momentum and lower body), place a chair behind you and rest your feet on the chair or use a pull-up band. Work your way up using these techniques until you can perform at least one proper pull-up. If you can't do one pull-up, then set a goal for completing five pull-ups in four months. When you can do 10 unassisted pull-ups, then set your goal for 15 unassisted pull-ups in three months, or four pull-ups while wearing your tactical vest in three months. Gradually, the more pull-ups you do, the more your muscles will mature in strength, enabling you to master this difficult but ultimately rewarding exercise. //

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sgt. Cyndi Williams works for a police department in central Florida, where she has spent 10 out of her 14 years in law enforcement. In her career, she has been a SWAT member at two agencies, totaling 10 years of SWAT service. She is a certified personal trainer and sports nutritionist through the International Fitness Association. She is a LouKa Tactical instructor (loukactical.com) where she specializes in ground combatives. Sgt. Williams holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and is currently working on her master's degree.


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