

Get Fit to Fight: Fighter Strength

Get Fit to Fight

Part 1: Fighter Strength

It has been my experience that strength training is poorly executed, or even simply neglected by MMA practitioners, and it is easy to understand why.

There is such a huge demand on the athletes - especially younger fighters. The hours they put into training each discipline, as well as getting enough recovery time, quickly adds up. Skill training typically gets priority over strength training by the majority of fighters and their coaches. So the time they do have has to be used efficiently.

One common mistake I have witnessed MMA fighters make is to try to mimic the “Circus-Act” of some outlandish program that they saw on the last episode of a reality series or read in some magazine. A common example of the type of exercise I’m talking about would be performing a back squat while balancing on an unstable surface.



Unless the goal is rehabilitation, performing any exercise on an unstable surface is a waste of time for building strength and mass. Another example is performing striking movements using bands or weights for resistance, and calling it a “sport-specific” exercise. In reality the fighter is just de-training technique, while providing inadequate muscle stimulation, all in the name of “sport specific” or “functional” training!

I assure you, professional fighters don't actually train this way. All that show-boating is done for the sake of “good TV” or to avoid revealing their **actual** training regime. When fighters actually do train this way, it is usually because they are lost and desperate and are looking for a shortcut to get that ever elusive “edge” over their competition. In some cases they are lead astray by “trainers” who are more than willing to scam them out of their hard earned dollars, whether intentionally or not, by advocating ridiculous training programs such as that. It is time to cut the fluff and drive your strength to herculean levels!

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There are no shortcuts. There is only hard work, following a rational plan. If you happen to be one of those “phenoms” who performs single leg deadlifts on a Bosu ball, while balancing on a yoga ball, while pulling a resistance band in front of you, while wearing black socks, and yet somehow still manage to have a championship belt, then I would argue that you have succeeded in spite of your “strength training” program, not because of it.

Consider what could be accomplished if a fighter with that kind of raw ability were to actually start training more effectively, and begin making significant strength gains. My suggestion is simple: if you want to gain an edge, you need to lift heavy weights.



Strength is the foundation for athleticism. You cannot develop explosive strength (power) without first possessing strength. If you are stronger, you can become faster, generate more force, and you will be more resistant to injury.

You have to drive out the frills and get back to basics. Following a program that is based around heavy sets of the core lifts such as back squats, deadlifts, presses, and high pulls or power cleans, will make you strong. Pre-historic strong. Strong enough to drag a Woolly Mammoth down by its tusks.

Being strong is always an advantage in combat sports. If you take two competitors who are technically equal on the ground and on their feet but one fighter is physically stronger - who would you bet on? That's right, the stronger guy! (I am just going to assume we can agree on this).

For those with A.D.D. or who simply want some variety in their program, other than just throwing around the black iron a few times a week, I recommend strongman or “odd implement” training. Not only is this style of training mentally refreshing but you can't get much more “functional” than flipping a 600 pound tire, lifting sandbags, or picking up and carrying a pair of heavy farmers handles for 30 meters. Many of these “real-world” movements have a high carry-over to combat sports. However, remember to program this type of exercise into your strength training routine logically, and not just haphazardly throw it in.

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I can hear some of you now saying: “But all that lifting heavy is going to make me too big to make weight!”

I have a really simple solution for that. Lose Fat! That's right. If you gained a few pounds of muscle your metabolism is elevated and it becomes that much easier to then lose a few pounds of fat. Let's be honest... I bet you could stand to lose a few, and then some. And please don't even consider going into a fight with double-digit body fat percentage, if you are at all serious about competing.

All smart-mouth comments aside, that is a very obvious and beneficial solution. Why carry around all that useless fat when you could be carrying around a few extra pounds of those powerful Type II fibers?

Your other weapon for successful combat is nutrition. You will not gain mass if you simply do not provide your body with the proper nutrients or enough calories to do so. How can the brick-layer build a wall if he doesn't have any bricks?



Nutrition is a fine balance. You must provide your body with enough fuel to energize your workouts and recover and repair, but not so much to the point where you are gaining too much mass (or even worse, gaining fat) making staying in your weight class impossible. Your goals will dictate your diet and your drive will dictate your success.

As a fighter, nutrition is something you should have down solid. If you don't know how to do it yourself consult a professional who does, and pay them to do the thinking for you.

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I hope this gave you something to think about when setting up your training plan in order to develop a solid strength base. In Part 2 of this article I will be discussing conditioning for MMA. Stay tuned for that!

Driven to succeed,

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Certified Personal Trainer

Stay tuned for Part 2: Conditioned to Fight

About the Author:

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Kris is a certified personal trainer, an athlete, and the owner of Drive Athletics. He has a strong background in MMA, including coaching as well as competitive experience.

Kris specializes in training for high intensity athletic conditioning as well as for fast and effective fat loss, for athletes and non-athletes alike.

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