

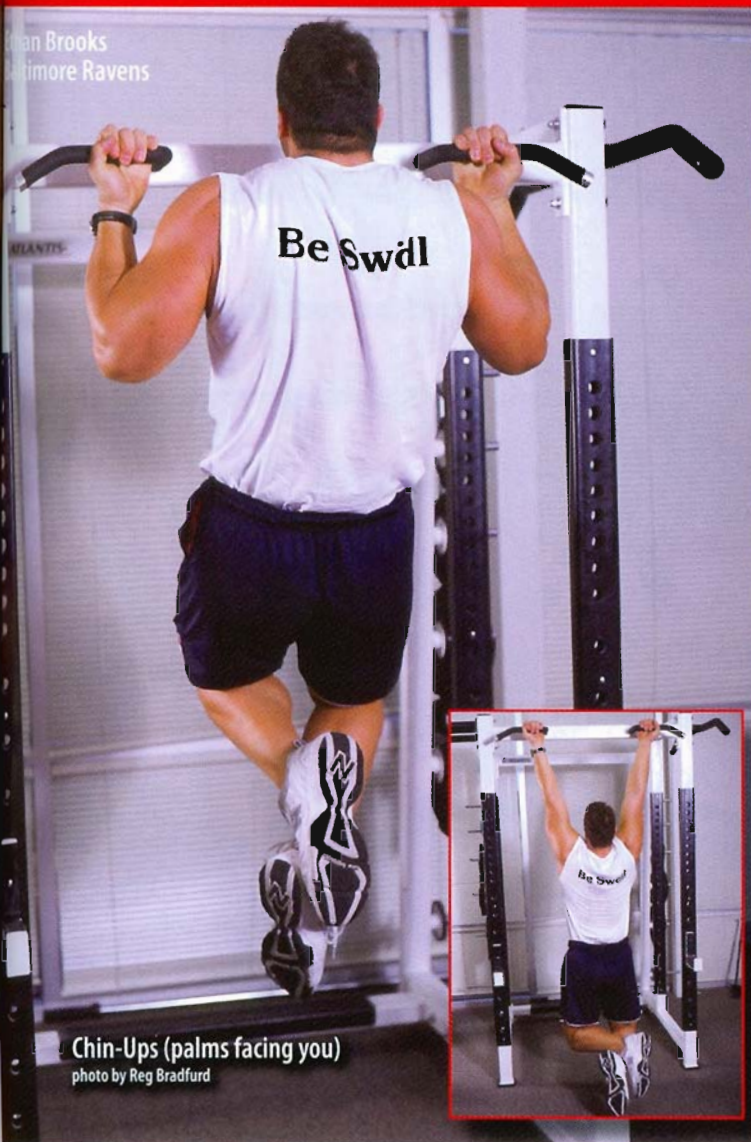
Getting [the] Back in Shape

*When it comes to achieving physical superiority,
it's often what's behind that counts!*

by John Rowbotham

#20 Kyle Coffman

Lake Travis High School, Austin , TX
Photo by Kevin Vandiver



Ian Brooks
Baltimore Ravens

Be Swdl

Chin-Ups (palms facing you)

photo by Reg Bradfurd



Ben Prentiss
Strength Coach

Pull-Ups (palms facing away from you)

photo by Reg Bradfurd

Check out the training logs of successful bodybuilders and you'll see that they perform countless variations of exercises for the upper and middle back. Only by performing a wide variety of exercises, each of which stresses the various muscle fibers from different angles, can bodybuilders refine their muscles and pack on as much size as possible. Indeed, a variety of exercises for the back muscles is crucial for athletes in every sport, but not for the purpose of building an aesthetic, symmetrical physique.

In every BFS clinic that we've held for the past 29 years we've recommended that all athletes, regardless of sport, perform power cleans and deadlifts. These are great core lifts that develop functional strength in the muscles of the upper and middle back. And in addition to emphasizing these lifts, we also encourage athletes to take their training to the next level by performing a variety of auxiliary exercises for the back. Not only are these exercises sport specific but they also will help prevent injuries, especially to the shoulder.

How important are pulling exercises for preventing injuries? BFS posed this question to Dr. Michael Ripley, a sports medicine specialist whose success stories include 27 sprinters who have won medals in the Olympic Games. Says Ripley, "Shoulder injuries are increasingly common among young athletes, and I believe two major factors are overworking the bench press and not performing pulling exercises such as chin-ups. Most of the athletes I treat for shoulder injuries have glaring weaknesses in the upper back and rotator cuff muscles, especially when compared to the strength of the pushing muscles used in the bench press. These imbalances make the shoulders more susceptible to injuries."

In the area of performance, success in many sports is strongly dependent upon pulling strength. Think of a linebacker grasping the shirt of a quarterback to score a sack, a wrestler pulling his opponent onto his back for the pin, or a basketball player grappling for a rebound. Without exception, every sport requires pulling power – and an athlete is

not going to develop it by performing a few extra sets on the bench press.

Getting Back in Shape

One of the additional benefits of performing auxiliary lifts is that they keep the workout interesting for the athletes. When asked why he has his football players perform such a wide variety of exercises, University of Utah Head Strength Coach Bruce Johnson said that changing the types of exercises his athletes perform motivates them. "It's hard for a guy to do the same lifts for five years and stay really motivated," says Johnson. Judging by the success of his athletes, Coach Johnson knows what he's talking about.

A great way to classify auxiliary pulling exercises, a method popularized by Australian strength coach Ian King, is to divide them into two groups: horizontal pulling exercises and vertical pulling exercises. Vertical pulling exercises would include pull-ups, chin-ups and lat pulldowns. Horizontal pulling exercises would include bent-over rows,

Lat Pulldown



incline lever rows, seated rows and vertical rows. Let's take a close look at each of these exercises.

CHIN-UPS AND PULL-UPS. If you look at gymnasts, athletes who rely heavily on these exercises, you'll see that they often possess tremendous upper back development. And this effect has not been forgotten in the bodybuilding community. In fact, former Mr. America Mike Dayton held a world record for one-arm chins and often opened his strongman shows doing a hundred chins off a ceiling girder.

The chin-up is one of the best exercises for not just the back but also the upper body. Some of the exercises worked with this auxiliary exercise (get out your anatomy books) include the following: latissimus dorsi, teres major, posterior deltoid, rhomboids, the sternal portion of the pectoralis major, the lower portions of the trapezius, and the biceps, brachialis, brachio-radialis and pronator teres. Whew!

Just to be clear, chin-ups are performed with your palms facing you (supinated grip), while pull-ups are performed with your palms facing away from you (pronated grip). Chin-ups emphasize the biceps and lats more than pull-ups do: a wider grip works the lats harder, whereas a closer grip works

the biceps more. As for pull-ups, they work the forearm muscles harder than the chin-up does and they put less stress on the wrists. But as with the bodybuilder, there is no such thing as a single best grip or best hand spacing for performing chin-ups or pull-ups – variety produces the best grip.

Regardless of the grip or hand spacing you use, you want to perform chin-ups and pull-ups with a full range of motion. At the start your shoulder blades should be elevated and your arms should be straight; but do not hyperextend your elbows, as this would place excessive stress on the connective tissues. The exercise is performed by holding your breath and simultaneously bending the arms and squeezing the shoulder blades together, achieving full contraction at the end of the exercise. Exhale as you lower yourself.

If athletes cannot perform the goal number of repetitions in their workout, they should bend their knees and have a spotter pull up on both ankles during the ascent. Only enough help should be given to enable an athlete to perform the goal number of reps, and less help should be given (if any) on the descent. When the goal number of reps is achieved, a spotter should hold on to only one ankle, as allowing the other leg to hang free will increase the load on the muscles. The next

Cable attachments for Lat Pulldowns

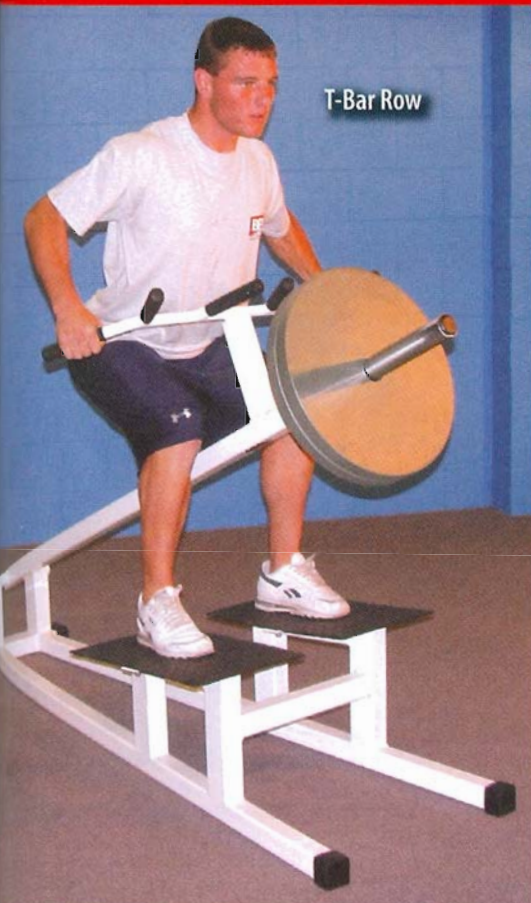


progression would be to have the athlete perform the lift without any assistance, and then eventually to increase resistance by attaching weight plates to a chin/dip belt.

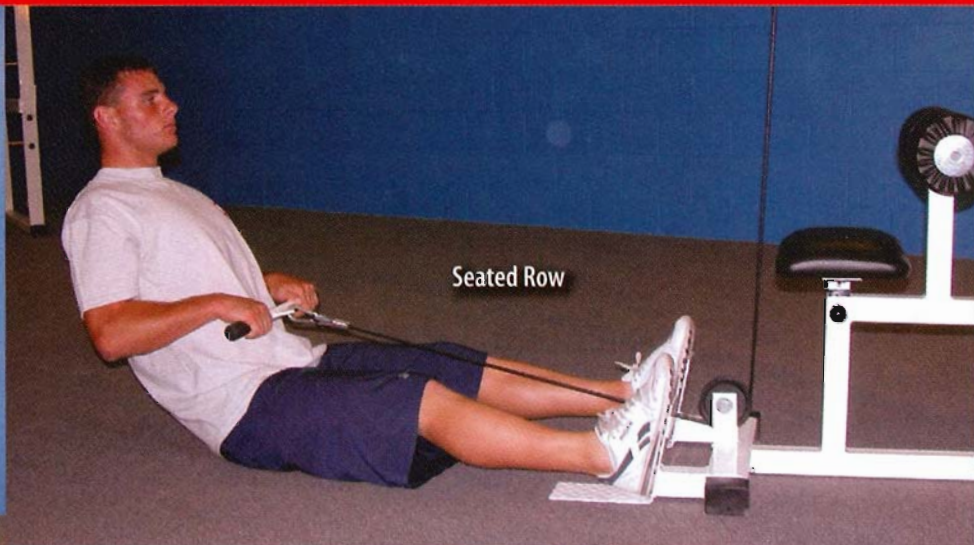
LAT PULLDOWNS. If an athlete cannot perform multiple repetitions properly or simply does not like chin-ups and pull-ups, the lat pulldown is an excellent alternative. Besides providing precise control of the resistance, the cable apparatus allows for the use of various attachments. For example, a V-handle will position the hands to face each other (semi-supinated grip), which will increase the work on the rhomboids and lower lat area.

Even though most athletes can eventually use relatively heavy weights in lat pulldown exercises, it's important that a thigh pad be attached to the machine to anchor the body. Also, in an attempt to use more weight in the exercise many athletes will instinctively crunch forward as they pull, so coaches must watch for this error as they supervise their athletes.

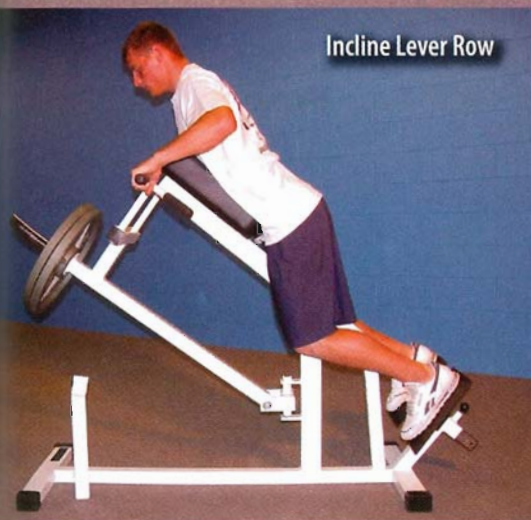
T-BAR ROWS AND INCLINE LEVER ROWS. For the middle back muscles, especially the rhomboids, rows are the exercise of choice. Two excellent ones are the T-bar row and the incline le-



T-Bar Row

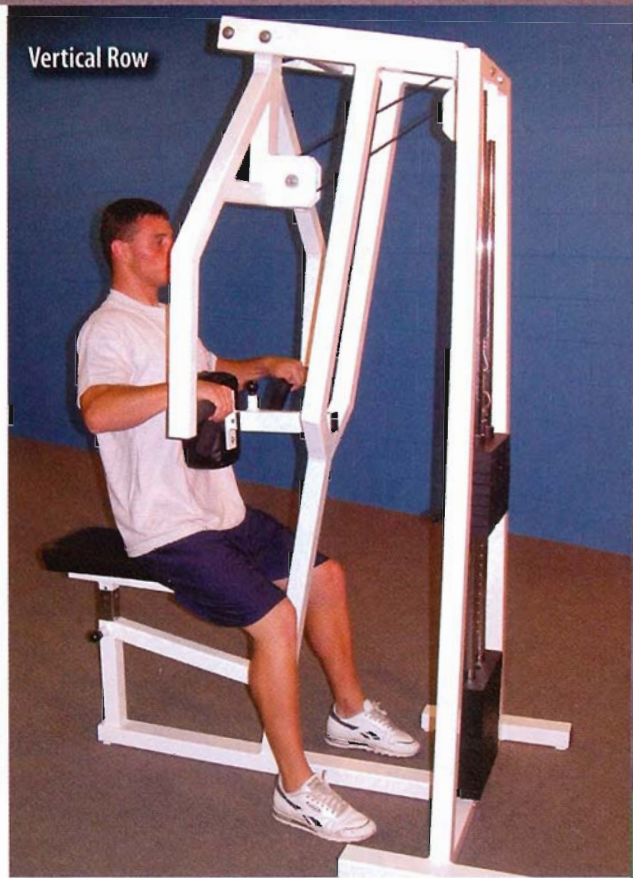


Seated Row



Incline Lever Row

“BFS stands by its core lifts as key to improving performance and preventing injury, but auxiliary exercises have their place – especially when it comes to training the muscles of the back.”



Vertical Row

ver row. The T-bar row is performed on a platform in which the weights are elevated off the floor and handles are attached across the barbell. An incline lever row is essentially the same exercise, but a chest pad is provided so that the athlete does not have to support the weight with the strength of the legs and lower back.

The most common errors that occur in the T-bar row are rounding the lower back, instead of maintaining a good arch (i.e., locking in the lower back), and cheating so that the legs and lower back are doing most of the work. An incline lever

row machine makes it easier to maintain proper form, as the back is supported with the chest pad. And as with the lat pulldown machine, the best T-bar row and incline lever row machines offer handles with multiple grips.

SEATED ROWS AND VERTICAL ROWS.

Seated rowing machines and vertical rowing machines are basically the same exercise, with seated rows using a cable apparatus and vertical rows using a lever arm. Both work the same muscles as the T-bar rows and incline lever rows, with the advantage of the vertical row being that it's easy to

get into position to start the exercise. And like the incline lever row, the vertical row has a chest pad to reduce the tendency to cheat or round the back. For all the machine exercises mentioned, look for seated row machines and vertical row machines that enable the exercise to be performed with multiple grips.

BFS stands by its core lifts as key to improving performance and preventing injury, but auxiliary exercises have their place – especially when it comes to training the muscles of the back.

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