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# Building a functional gym

By Louis Hayes

Expensive machines and equipment alone do not produce elite fitness. Top-notch physical fitness is being cultivated in facilities described as: caveman, archaic, prison, Spartan, industrial, garage, primitive, old-school. These are all terms of endearment proudly used by those who use them. Functional fitness gyms are void of many luxurious-looking pieces of equipment, instead filled with only a few necessities. This article will walk through some of those essentials.

A sub-culture within the functional fitness community does exist. Aside from its unique wardrobe and unending search for new sadistic or masochistic exercises, this sub-culture prides itself on using some of the most primitive of equipment. Some even go out of their way to find something older, dirtier, grungier, or more “caveman” than the others. Luckily for us, these primitive essentials to functional fitness are generally not only inexpensive, but easy to get.

## My gym

I am quite fortunate to have free unrestricted access to the police-fire gym at my station. It has every piece of fitness equipment imaginable: Smith rack, cable-crossover tower, heavy bags, counter-weighted pullup/dip assist, weight machines for each and every body part, and a smorgasbord of cardio machines. When factoring in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors, huge flat panel television, and hi-tech sound system, my gym has everything!

However, when my path to functional fitness began a few years ago, I found myself using less and less of those pieces of top-notch name brand equipment. I ignored most anything that had a cable, a seat, or a greased

pivot-point. Gone were my visits to the leg extension and leg curl stations. The same went for the lat-pulldown tower and the butterfly station. I even quit using the bench press.

I had always, and still do brag about how well-equipped my health club-quality police gym is. Yet I use only a fraction of the equipment. And of the pieces I use, they are some of the most affordable (read: cheapest) ones in the room.

## The essentials

It pains me to hear police officers (and firefighters) complaining about how ill-equipped their PD/FD gyms are, or how a small budget will never outfit a fitness facility. Here are some of the basics elements for such a frugal facility:

- Olympic barbell
- 300 pounds of Olympic weights (rubberized are best)

- Power cage, or half cage, or squat stands
- Pullup bar
- Padded floor mats

If you look at that list and tell yourself, “That’s it? That’s pretty simplistic,” you would be right. But you’d also have more than enough equipment to accommodate absolute beginners and veteran elitists alike. If your gym had nothing but these components, you’d be quite operational. The above pieces have extremely broad applications and uses, which is why I have placed them as the essentials.

## The next step

While those items above are the foundation, the items in this next list are for a little more specialization (read: less general in use).

- Glute-Ham station (or “Roman Chair”)
- Dip tower



A police officer performs back extensions on the roman chair.

Photo courtesy of Louis Hayes

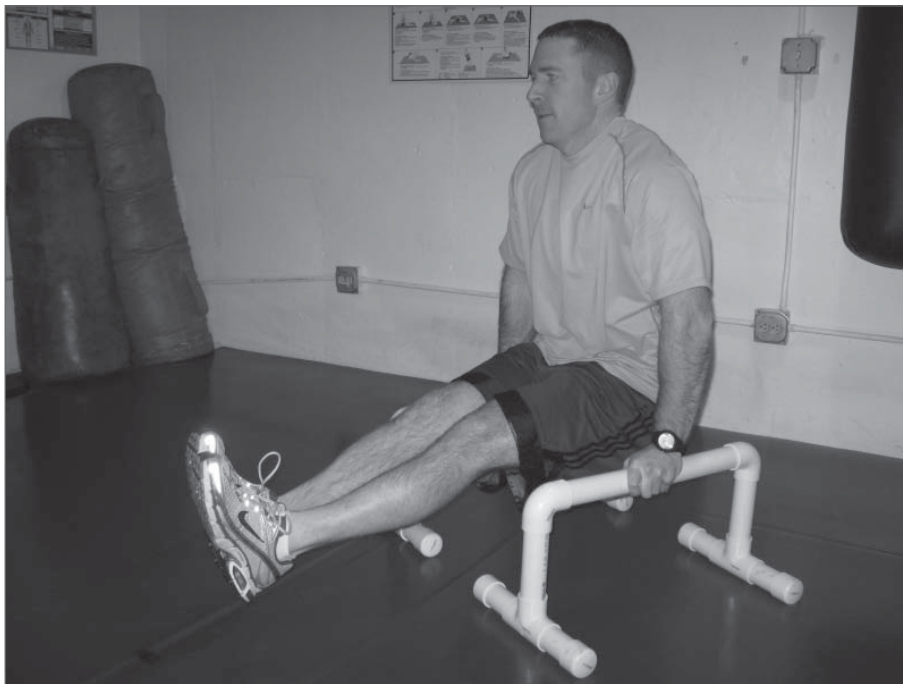


Stacks of rubber plates do cost more than their iron counterparts.

- Kettlebells (15, 25, 35, 50lb)
- Parallettes
- Jump rope

As far as kettlebells, picks of 15, 25, 35, and 50-pounders would probably be more than enough. There is some mainstream opposition to kettlebells, citing an over-hyping and danger of use. Is there a lot of hype? Yes. Is there a risk of injury? Yes. Can you do without them? Yes. Do I still recommend them? Yes. Their design is comfortable for a variety of upper and lower body exercises. Plus, kettlebells can be taken and used almost anywhere—inside or outside.

Parallettes are mini-parallel bars, or enlarged pushup handles. I made mine at home from PVC piping for



These homemade parallettes allow for much more than this L-sit hold.

\$22. Their low cost keeps them in this middle step.

### The luxury step

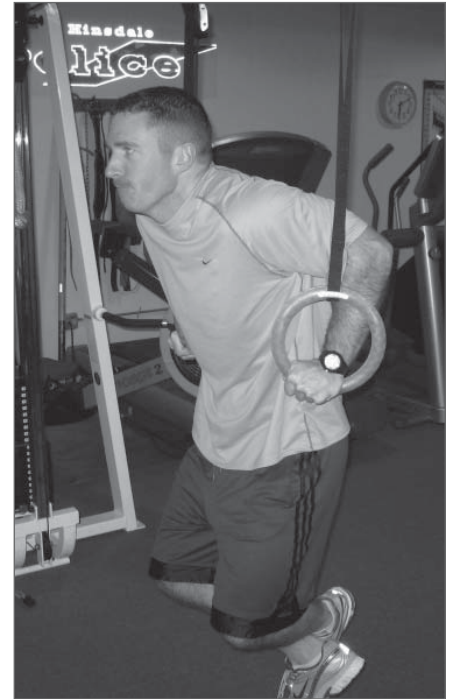
I sarcastically call this “the Luxury Step” because by this time, the list is populated by most of the equipment necessary to attain practical functional fitness.

- Plyometric jump box
- Dumbbells—pick your weight range
- Gymnastics rings
- Slosh pipe
- Non-reactive medicine balls
- Heavy punching bag

A jump box can be either homemade or store-bought. Jump training is important for building explosive power. While jumps can be done without a box, having one keeps you honest.

Gymnastics rings have their own cultish following. The frictionless plane of gym rings demand greater coordination and stabilization for pushups, pullups, dips, and inverted rows. Rings cost between \$75-100.

A slosh pipe is a homemade 8' to 10' length of 3" or 4" PVC pipe



Gymnastics ring dips are significantly more challenging than bar dips.

filled partly with water. The “sloshing” water taxes the body during even the simplest of movements. Typical weight is about 40-45 pounds.

Lastly, medicine balls should be soft, not the rubber bouncy type. I leave MBs as the last luxury in my list, as they are fairly expensive at \$100+.

### Cardio machines

I purposely ignored cardio machines in this article. There are just so many to name and discuss. Limited budgets are quickly eaten up by quality treadmills, bikes, elliptical trainers, rowers, climbers, and the sort. Money can be better spent on other pieces of equipment.

### Summary

For some reason, the fitness craze has embraced technology. Every health club in America has elliptical machines and treadmills lined up next to rows of padded machines resembling contortionist contraptions. A gym without a leg press sled is deemed ill-outfitted by popular culture. Technology has done very positive things to promote an easy entry into a fitness program. But using



Photo courtesy of [www.motorcitycrossfit.com](http://www.motorcitycrossfit.com)

Owner (friend and SWAT operator) Vinny Palazzolo of Motor City CrossFit near Detroit just moved into a new facility.

limited-application machines designed for isolating muscles during specific unnatural movements through short ranges of motion is not efficient. Yes, they are easy to use, but not realistic to reach real-life fitness.

Nothing has done more throughout the journey of elite physical fitness than Gravity and Education. Gravity's constant pull to the Earth's center has given many men worthy challenges. Two years ago, I tackled a 12-week program with nothing more than a 35-pound weight. I also recently spent 30 days doing a Prison Workout, using nothing more than my bodyweight, a 4'x8' section of floor, and a pullup bar. I can testify to the daunting workouts that my arch-nemesis Gravity has gifted to me.

Education is paramount. Without learning how to maximize the potential of these limited gym resources, your efforts might be in vain. Correctly doing exercises is the key to not only results, but injury prevention. Practical, functional fitness education is a long, continuing effort that cannot be overlooked. While certified personal trainers (educated in functional fitness principles) are the best resource, I have flooded my own personal studies with research and information, much found online. Be wary of watching public domain internet videos...as any fool with a camera and computer can post a video clip. Educate yourself—and use lots of sources.

Yes there is a catch: this is a gym for "functionalists."

But then again, the purpose of this article was how to build a facility in which you can reach peak physical fitness, not how to make your gym resemble a health club. With even the tightest of budgets, you can turn your basement, garage, or stationhouse gym into a high-performance workshop. If you'd tally up gym membership fees for a year, think of the equipment you could buy. Sharing the expenses with a group yields endless options.

I align myself within that fitness sub-culture, enjoying a Spartan's minimalist approach to fitness. With my prisoner mindset and mismatched outfit, I walk into my stationhouse's bright glamorous gym. As I pass thousands of dollars worth of technology, I grab my caveman equipment ...and train outside my comfort zone. ★

#### About the author

Author: Louis Hayes is a Police Officer for the Hinsdale (IL) Police Department, where his responsibilities include coordinating the in-house Physical Fitness and Wellness Program, as well as instructing use of force disciplines. He is assigned to the FIAT SWAT Taskforce as Team Leader and Primary Firearms Instructor. Louis sits on the Board of Directors for the Illinois Tactical Officers Association. He also contributes to a for-the-good-of-mankind website Trinity Training Group at <http://trinitytraining.blogspot.com>. Louis can be reached at [louis.hayes@comcast.net](mailto:louis.hayes@comcast.net).