

# What Is Functional Fitness?

By [Chet Morjaria](#) and [Stephen Hollingdale](#)

FK.UK is an umbrella organisation dedicated to advancing functional fitness in the UK. It is a diverse community of people brought together by a passion for functional fitness, each with unique backgrounds and perspectives to offer. This makes for a fantastic breeding ground for the sharing of information and experience; facilitating access to expert knowledge and quality resources on functional fitness is a key tenet on which FK.UK continues to build.

But what is functional fitness and how do you achieve it?

## The shift from bodybuilding to functional training

Traditionally the fitness community has embraced methods from bodybuilding, using machines such as the leg press or exercises like the bicep curl to build muscle or 'tone up' with little regard for how those muscles might be used in the real world. Fitness is defined by how much you can bench followed by how long you jog on a treadmill while watching MTV. And if you have a six pack? Then you must be in shape!

## The 300 effect



Functional fitness has been coming more to the forefront of the fitness world thanks in part

to increased coverage in the mainstream media and intrigue generated by the training regime used by the cast of the movie *300*. This programme, created by Mark Twight at [gymjones.com](http://gymjones.com), was purported to be one of the toughest workouts ever by the press and the “300 workout” quickly became one of *Men’s Health* magazines most popular workouts ever (source: [www.menshealth.com](http://www.menshealth.com)).

Inevitably many people dwelt on the by-product of the process, *those* six packs, and missed the real point of the training which was to build a functional, tough-minded cadre of people who not only looked like warriors but felt and behaved like warriors.

But the development of online communities devoted to functional fitness, such as [rosstraining.com](http://rosstraining.com) and [crossfit.com](http://crossfit.com), together with the emergence of the kettlebell as an all-round training tool and the increased awareness of training modalities based on gymnastics and olympic weightlifting due to the build up to the London 2012 Olympics has led people to look beyond the machines and bodybuilding routines for something different. Functional training seemed to fit the bill.

### **Weighted yoga on a swiss ball?**

Unfortunately the term ‘functional training’ has become an industry buzz-word and catch-all, with many personal trainers and gym leaders frantically trying to come up with new classes and exercises to cater for the demand to be training ‘functionally’ without ever really knowing just what it is they should be doing.

How many people can now be seen in the local chain gym performing a pressing exercise on a swiss ball, their bodies contorted in all manner of unnatural poses just to stay upright? The ball provides some instability meaning your assisting muscles have to work hard too – that must be functional, right?

We beg to differ. Just because it is hard does not mean it is an effective functional exercise or an effective use of time. For an exercise to be deemed functional it must have some transference to activities outside of the gym, so while the exercise above may work muscles

that would normally be neglected in bodybuilding, it has little benefit or carryover to any other activity you might be asked to perform in everyday life. It is difficult to think of a real life situation this exercise would apply to.

Functional fitness practitioners look to get 'more bang for your buck' with the exercises we do - which usually means movements that tax numerous big muscles in the body, work the body as a unit and have immediate transferability to real life. So what would you do instead of a press on a swiss ball? Simple: stand up and press a heavy weight overhead. Standing up means the body creates its own instability and the trunk and legs must work to stabilise the weight, whilst the upper body works in concert with the lower body to put the weight overhead. This has clear application to real life tasks - putting something on a high shelf, or passing up a heavy box to a friend in the loft. In the real world objects can be any shape or size so we vary the type of object we press overhead in our training too - a barbell, a dumbbell, a rock, other odd shaped objects. This helps us to prepare for life's varied eventualities.

### **Functional fitness in everyday life**

If you were to ask ten people in the street to define functional fitness you would perhaps receive ten wildly different definitions, all of which may be right and yet paradoxically might also be wrong. A 1500 metre runner may claim to be functionally fit if he can complete his race in a sub-4 minute time; a powerlifter might claim to be functionally fit if her squat is twice her bodyweight. By their own individual definitions each is correct, they are functionally fit, and yet to a third observer they may not be considered functionally fit at all. Both may be functionally fit for their sport but may have multiple deficiencies in other areas that define total fitness. For example that same 1500 metre runner may not be able to pick up his groceries, lacking sufficient strength, whereas the powerlifter would have no trouble hoisting her bags from the floor, but may be unable to run the thirty metres to catch the bus.

We define functional fitness as

*" a level of fitness that allows an individual to perform at the highest possible levels, both in*

*everyday life and for their chosen sport or activity, as well as being able to cope with any unexpected physical event they may be presented with".*

This definition allows us not only to train for the everyday – running up stairs, carrying a load – but also to specialise somewhat in those activities that we choose to make more important in the scale of training to allow us to compete in our chosen activities (specialised physical preparation, or SPP). In other words, what you want to be fit *for*.

### **Five pillars of functional fitness**

There are five pillars at the heart of our definition and approach:

- Free weights and free movement
- A foundation of strength and technique
- Abilities before aesthetics
- Nutrition and recovery
- Increasing quality of life

These five pillars are the structures around which our definition of functional fitness is built – each one is fundamental to the stability of the whole system.

We'll explain the five pillars briefly below and explore them in greater detail in future articles.

**Free weights and free movement** – free weights, not machines, best mimic the demands of everyday life and emergency situations. The body works as a unit in free space, not with muscles in isolation along a single plane.

**A foundation of strength and technique** – many people overtrain their cardiovascular systems with running or circuit training but neglect their strength and skill. We believe strength training is the foundation of functional fitness. If you can lift a heavier weight, you will get fitter. If you can move more efficiently, you will be able to accomplish even more work in less time.

**Abilities before aesthetics** – train your abilities and the aesthetics will look after themselves. You will *look* fitter because you will actually *be* fitter. The increased confidence you get from improving your physical abilities will also make you more appealing: confidence, posture, athleticism, these are all attractive traits.

**Nutrition and recovery** – what happens outside training is just as important as training itself. We take a holistic approach to fitness – what you eat, how you sleep, your mental attitude, your environment; all of these aspects affect your fitness.

**Increasing quality of life** – why train and be able to carry your bags when you can just call a taxi or put them in a trolley? Because functional training increases the *quality* of your life, your ability to accomplish tasks, remain independent and active for decades to come. Functional training takes into account not just the next three months but your whole lifespan.

### **How do I get functionally fit?**

Now that we know what functional fitness is, how do we go about achieving it? Jim Cawley of Dynamax Medicine Balls defined ten facets that comprise fitness: cardiovascular/respiratory endurance, stamina, strength, flexibility, power, speed, coordination, agility, accuracy and balance. In the FK.UK Daily Workout (FK.DW) model, the last four components are combined under the broader section heading of skill. We'll talk more about the FK.DW below.

The purely general physical preparedness (GPP) model advocated by the likes of Crossfit will train each of these aspects equally in order to create a balanced athlete who is ready for the unknown and unknowable: that is, they will be ready to face any physical challenge as and when it may arise.

For the regular gym goer largely interested in general physical fitness and, yes, a 'toned' body, this model is perhaps sufficient; however for a sportsperson it may be necessary to concentrate on one or more of these factors to the detriment of others so they may

perform at the highest possible level on the field of play. A rugby player may concentrate more on the strength, power and speed aspects at the cost of some time spent on flexibility, whereas a gymnast may not have the same need for cardiovascular endurance, preferring to concentrate on accuracy, balance and flexibility in addition to the strength and power exercises. Indeed even within a sport the needs of positional players may be drastically different: an American football lineman may spend the bulk of training concentrating on strength and power, whereas a wide receiver may focus on speed, agility, balance and coordination.

Another area of departure from the Crossfit model of randomised strength and conditioning is that it allows for no real linear progression in strength exercises. Some gains are made, but without specific programming these gains are often hard to quantify and come slower than if a periodised template were to be used. Interestingly a number of models have emerged within the Crossfit world recently in an attempt to address this - such as Crossfit Football and Crossfit Strength Bias.

### **What is the FK Daily Workout?**

The model FK.UK proposes is a combination of the GPP and SPP models: no single area of fitness is to be ignored totally, and yet some measure of specificity is included in training: for example the use of linear progression in the form of specific strength workouts in addition to the metabolic conditioning routines used. The FK Daily Workout (FK.DW) is our offering in this regard. Each workout has a general warm-up followed by a skills section, then moves to either a strength or conditioning section followed by a cool-down period. On certain days the strength routine may be followed by a short yet intense conditioning routine.

Those individuals following the posted workout should see measurable gains in all areas of general physical fitness, while at the same time will easily be able to incorporate sport specific skills and exercises to the routine as and when they are required, leading to a fully rounded athlete who can indeed claim to be functionally fit.

## How do I get started with the FK.DW?

The best way to get started with the [FK.DW](#) is to simply jump right in and try it. Don't worry if you don't think you can manage the workout as posted on the website. The beauty of the FK.DW is that it is totally scalable. Can't do an exercise? Substitute it for something else or use one of the progressions and work towards completing the workout fully over time.

Weight too heavy? Simply use a lower weight. We normally don't specify a weight to use for the simple reason that a weight that may be relatively light for one athlete may be almost impossible for another, leading to a different physical effect to that originally intended by the programme. Instead we will tell you the desired training effect and trust you to pick a weight that allows you to complete the workout in the timeframe specified with good form and the desired intensity.

Another scaling method is to reduce the number of reps performed so you finish in the same timeframe but using the same weight. A combination of the two is even possible! Each workout has a corresponding thread on the forum. Post up on this if you would like any help on scaling or progressions for that workout, and you will receive all the help you need.

For example the posted workout may be 20-15-10 kettlebell swings and pull-ups as fast as possible. This means do 20 kettlebell swings and 20 pull-ups, then 15 kettlebell swings and 15 pull-ups, then 10 kettlebell swings and 10 pull-ups. Take rest only as needed since the overall time taken is the key, not the rest periods.

We may say "aim to complete within 3-6 minutes" so one method of scaling would be to reduce the reps to 15-12-10, or perhaps scale by using jumping pull-ups. You could even use the 15-12-10 rep scheme *and* do jumping pull-ups if that's what you need to complete the workout correctly. So long as you note that in your training log (you do have an FK.UK training log don't you?) you can compare your results the next time this workout comes up and delight in how much you have improved!



Still unsure? Visit the [FK.UK forum](#). Sign up and introduce yourself, check existing threads, ask some questions and maybe peruse the logs of some other members to see where they needed help. Everyone was a beginner at some point and there are no stupid questions.

Want to find out more? Click the [Start Here!](#) link on the website. Read some articles, join the community on the forum, check forthcoming events near you to see what it is all about, ask questions of friendly folk - in short, get involved!

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