

Simply Sandbags – Simply an Effective Fitness System

Troy M. Anderson is the owner of Integrated Evolution, located Tempe, AZ. Along with writing articles Coach Anderson actively works with clients that range from grandmas to national champions, with a goal of getting the job done, as simply and as safely as possible. When not coaching Troy can be found competing either in Olympic lifting or on the Australian Rules Football oval. For more training information and to subscribe to the monthly newsletter The Blue Collar Fitness Report be sure to drop by Coach Anderson's website www.integratedevolution.org

“Less is more”. I know many of you can relate to that old saying. As regular readers of Dan's newsletter, you know that no matter what your health and fitness goals are great progress can be made with the most basic equipment. Literally thousands of different movements can be performed with just a few pieces such as a barbell, a few dumbbells or kettlebells, a pull-up bar, and maybe a piece or two of strongman equipment.

Well, I'd like to propose another type of basic equipment to add to your arsenal. This is one I have recently re-discovered – sandbags. Yes, sandbags. Although they are not necessarily the best tool for maximal strength, they can help develop several other valuable qualities, primarily:

- General Physical Preparedness (GPP)**

- Grip Strength**

I first came to know sandbags (actually 50 lb bags of oats and corn) as a young man on my family's farm in Wyoming. Although I thought I was performing manual labor, I was actually being initiated into the world of sandbag training. The next stop on my sandbag journey was high school wrestling. We actually had manufactured sandbags for this. The tools of choice were 25, 35, and 50 pound bags which we regularly used as a conditioning circuit at the end of practice. Talk about brutal.

The next stop on my sandbag adventure was in an oil field unloading semi-trailers full of 100 lb bags of bentonite. Not much fun. Finally we come to the present day. You might think that I would have had my fill by now, but I have recently produced and use for GPP drills my own set of sandbags. That just goes to show what a profound impact they have had on me, and what a fun change of pace from all of the "normal" tools I think they are.

I thought I would share a couple of favorite GPP drills in case you might be interested in implementing some sandbag training of your own. By the way, if you don't have sandbags, don't worry. Later in the article, I will give you my “special recipe” for making them.

Hill Run and Press

Although we live in some pretty flat country here in Tempe, AZ, there are a couple of parks that have decent hills. Hill runs provide quite a training session by themselves, but when you add the sandbags, you have just kicked the GPP thermometer into triple-digit overdrive.

Here's what you need:

- a healthy set of legs and lungs
- a hill 20-50 yards in length
- 1 stopwatch
- 2 sandbags (Depending on your level of strength and fitness, 50-100 lb bags would work for men, and 20-50 lb bags would fit the bill for women.)

Here's how it works:

- The goal of this drill is to perform as many overhead presses as possible, which also means performing as many sprints as possible.
- Place one sandbag at the bottom of the hill and one at the top.
- Set your stopwatch for 15 minutes
- At the bottom of the hill, start by "cleaning" the sandbag and then completing 5 overhead presses.
- Once you have completed the overhead presses, place/drop the sandbag on the ground and sprint to the top of the hill.
- At the top of the hill, "clean" the sandbag and press for 5 reps.
- Replace sandbag on the ground and walk/jog back down the hill.
- Repeat the cycle until the 15 minutes have elapsed.

Notes:

- If you misjudge your sandbag weight and it is too heavy, drop your reps to 4, 3, 2, or 1. Just try to beat your previous number of presses during your next training session.
- If your sandbag is too light, you may need to increase the reps. I find that 5 reps keeps things moving at a nice pace, but if you feel it is necessary to do so, then go ahead and play with larger rep schemes.
- If you are just beginning, don't be shy about taking your time coming back down the hill. This is your rest time. Cherish it.

Sandbag Medley

This one has become a staple of my outdoor conditioning camps. Before I get too far, just let me say that there are a multitude of protocols you can apply here so feel free to be creative. I personally use 3 pairs of sandbags – 2 at 30 lbs, 2 at 45 lbs, and 2 at 75 lbs for this drill, but as you'll see below, other numbers of bags will work as well.

Here's what you need:

- an ironclad grip and a dash of intestinal fortitude

- a length of open ground (I prefer the full length of a soccer field.)
- 1 stopwatch
- 2-6 sandbags (Depending on the number of participants and their fitness level, I usually have each participant work with 3 sandbags.)

Here's how it works:

- The object of the drill is to move your sandbags from one end of the "field" to the other and back.
- Typically, each participant gets one bag of each weight (30 lbs, 45 lbs, and 75 lbs).
- Start with your sandbags at one end of the field.
- "Clean" the 30 lb bag, press 10 times, then carry it to the other end of the field and drop.
- "Clean" the 45 lb bag, press 5 times, then carry it to the other end of the field and drop.
- "Clean" the 75 lb bag and then carry it to the other end of the field and drop.
- Now that the bags are at the other end, you need to repeat the process and bring them back to your starting point.
- Be sure to start the stopwatch just prior to "cleaning" the first bag and stop the clock once you have returned your last sandbag to the starting position.
- Bags can be moved in any order you choose so long as all the bags get moved and all the pressing gets done.
- Try to beat your best time each training session.

Notes:

- You may need to adjust your protocols or the weight of the sandbags for these drills based on your strength level. What I have outlined above is a basic drill that works well for most of my current male and female clients.
- Carry the bags in a way that you find challenging and beneficial. The methods we have used are "hugged" to the chest, "end" gripped in a rack position, and overhead.
- If you are fit enough, feel free to jog/run/sprint in between bouts of carrying the sandbags.
- Lastly, probably the most beneficial part of this drill is developing the practical ability to lift an oddly shaped object (think large bags of food for your dog or salt for the water softener) from the ground to chest level.

The two drills that I have outlined are just the tip of the iceberg. I use a handful of other applications with these little bags of fun, and there are probably thousands more. In my opinion, sandbags pretty much have all the bases covered. You can raise/"clean" them from the ground.

You can lift them overhead. You can carry them. Best of all, of course, you can drop them. Whether you are interested in general conditioning or athletic performance, sandbags are simply a great tool to add to your workout regimen. Funny, isn't it? The simple things are often the best.

What's the recipe?

Now that I have discussed some of the applications and merits of sandbag training, and you have decided to give them a try, there still may be one thing holding you back. You don't have any sandbags. I faced the same dilemma. As you can imagine, sandbags are not something you normally find on the bargain shelf of your local grocery or quickie mart. So I was forced into action. I made my own bags. The supplies and costs for producing two bags of each weight (30 lbs, 45 lbs, and 75 lbs) are detailed below.

Here's what you need:

- 4 75 lb bags of plain sand
- 1 box contractor grade plastic garbagebags
- 2-3 rolls of duct tape
- 1 canister of zip ties
- 6 burlap sacks

All of the above items were purchased at Home Depot except the burlap sacks which I got at a local feed store.

Total Cost = \$52 and a little sweat equity (not too bad for 300 lbs of weight).

How to do it:

1. Pour desired amount of sand into a garbage bag. Weigh, zip tie, and tape it shut.
2. Place the filled garbage bag inside another garbage bag and repeat closing process.
3. Insert the sand-filled garbage bag inside a burlap sack. Zip tie and tape the burlap sack closed.

Note:

When dealing with the plastic bags, try to get as much air as possible out of the bags. This will make the final closure of the burlap sack much easier.

4. In order to "tighten" things up a bit, shake the sand-filled garbage bag down to the bottom of the burlap sack and then fold back any excess burlap. Once this is completed, tape two lines around the bag and then run another line of tape around the ends of the bag.

Note: Be liberal with the duct tape as this is what is actually holding your bag together. After all, you do not want 30 lbs or more of sand dumping on your head in the middle of an overhead press.

5. Repeat the process to produce the desired number and size of sandbags.

Enjoy!

A Fun Experience

