

Inventive Reasons to Own a Hex Bar



Use the versatile Hex bar for much more than deadlifts and shoulder shrugs

Anybody remember *MacGyver*? This was a 1980s TV series about a government agent who was able to solve crimes and save lives (often his own) by virtue of his ability to turn ordinary objects into extraordinary objects. With a comb, a paper clip and some chewing gum, our hero (played by Richard Dean Anderson) was able to unlock safes, perform heart surgery and develop a radar jamming device that would alter the course of a nuclear missile headed for New York City. The legacy of the show, which ran for seven seasons, was that any person with a knack for inventing things was automatically nicknamed “MacGyver.” For this reason, Canadian strength coach Paul Gagné is a great choice for a 21st century MacGyver.

Co-owner of the Sports Performance Center in Montreal,



Paul Gagné is one of Canada's premier strength coaches and a big advocate of Hex bar training.

Quebec, Gagné has earned a reputation as one of Canada's leading strength coaches and rehabilitation specialists. He has personally trained more than 50 players in the NHL and has worked with many professional golfers and football players. But the one trait that sets Gagné apart is his ability to develop special exercises to help rehabilitate injuries and take athletes to the highest levels of functional strength. His most recent project: the BFS Hex bar.

The Hex bar is a hexagonal barbell that allows an athlete to perform exercises from inside the encompassing bar. Handgrips strategically placed on the two ends of the bar enable the weight on the bar to be in perfect alignment with the athlete's center mass. This design enables athletes

to safely and more effectively perform deadlifts and shoulder shrugs, which are the two primary exercises most coaches have their athletes perform with the bar. Gagné takes his Hex bar use to the next level.

Because he trains athletes from several sports and is also involved in rehabilitation, Gagné

Sylvain Girard is a wide receiver for the Alouettes in the CFL. Girard is one of Canada's fastest football players, running 4.22 in the 40-yard dash.

likes to have a large variety of exercises in his strength coaching toolbox. But working out of a small private gym, he does not have the floor space to load up on lots of bulky, expensive machines. This necessity, plus his MacGyver-like disposition, prompted him to develop dozens of effective exercises to use with the Hex bar.

As with many coaches, Gagné prefers the Hex bar deadlift to the regular deadlift because he finds athletes tend to round the back and get out of position when they use the barbell. "With a regular barbell athletes tend to flex the spine too much, which shifts the weight away from the muscles and onto the ligaments. Over time this could be very dangerous. The Hex bar increases the proprioception of the lumbar spine so that athletes will more likely maintain the correct lumbar curvature when they lift the weight off the floor."

One slight variation of the Hex bar deadlift that Gagné often uses is to perform the exercise in the regular manner but doing so with the toes raised. "Lifting the toes shifts your bodyweight back, which will increase the recruitment of the glutes and hamstrings. For athletes who are recovering from ACL surgery or have other knee problems such as patella femoral syndrome, I have them perform the Hex bar deadlift with their toes elevated."

In addition, says Gagné, deadlifting with the toes elevated might be of some benefit to athletes who tend to overpronate (i.e., have flat feet), as it can strengthen the muscles that arch the foot. Further, Gagné will also have athletes perform Hex bar deadlifts on the low rocker board to develop the muscles of the feet and ankles. "Performing the Hex bar deadlift on a rocker board is much, much safer than performing squats on this type of apparatus. Also, it is easier to balance, and athletes can use more weight, which is important if these types of exercises are to have a func-

tional carryover to sports."

Although performing safer deadlifts is a key issue for Gagné, the main reason he prefers the Hex bar is to help his athletes increase grip strength. "Grip strength is very important for most of the athletes I train, especially hockey, baseball and football players. Some of my athletes use over 600 pounds for certain Hex bar exercises, and using these types of weights develops tremendous grip strength without placing excess stress on the lower back. We often play

around with a thumbless grip or just using certain fingers on exercises such as shrugs and deadlifts. I also like to use the Hex bar for the farmer's walk, as it prevents athletes from overstriding, is



Photo courtesy Patrick Sanfaçon, Montreal Alouettes



more stable and is less likely to cause injury than when using dumbbells or the special 'tornado' devices used to perform the exercise."

Another valuable aspect of the Hex bar is teaching proper squatting technique with the lower back arched and sitting back. In addition to teaching the squat, Gagné often teaches the Hex bar as a good alternative, especially for tall athletes. "When you're working with tall athletes you really have to be careful about overloading the spine, especially with hockey players because they bend forward all the time when they play, a position that places a lot of continual tension on the spine. The Hex bar places less compressive forces on the spine, which enables me to train these athletes with a higher volume of training than they could handle if they only performed squats."

Gagné has developed dozens of exercises to use with the Hex bar, and he's always coming up with new ones. Here are eight of his favorites.

Hex Bar Push-up

Performing a push-up with the Hex bar has the advantage of allowing the athlete to work the arms, chest and shoulders through a greater range of motion. It also allows for less stress due to the alignment of the

Hex Bar Push-up



Start

Finish

wrist and forearms. “There’s a lot of research now showing that we should not do push-ups on the hands because of the stress it places on the wrist,” says Gagné. “Women especially complain about wrist pain and compression of the hand, but they don’t have this problem with the Hex bar and they get better results.”

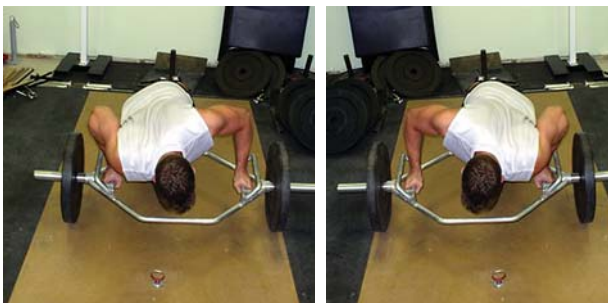
To increase the difficulty of the Hex bar push-up, Gagné will add weight plates (usually bumper plates, as they tend to roll easier than steel plates). “The plates make it hard to control the barbell, working the shoulders and even the abdominals and many of the muscles that stabilize the spine.” When that’s too easy, he will elevate the feet.

Side-to-Side Hex Bar Push-Up

The side-to-side Hex bar push-up strengthens all the upper-body muscles that the Hex push-up does, but it also works the rotator cuff muscles harder, as they are involved in stabilization during this exercise. “The Hex bar will tend to tip during this exercise, and the rotator cuff muscles have to work especially hard to prevent this.”

To perform the exercise, Gagné assumes the same position as in the Hex bar push-up, but instead of lowering straight down, he lowers to just one side, alternating left and right with each rep. As with the push-up, to gradually increase the difficulty he starts with-

Side-to-Side Hex Bar Push-up



Start

Finish

Hex Bar Pivot Push-up



Start

Finish

out the weight plates, then adds the plates and then elevates the feet.

Hex Bar Pivot Push-up

Here is a great core exercise for all the major stabilizing muscles of the torso. It’s performed by turning the Hex bar sideways and placing one weight plate on the weight shaft farthest from the body. Keeping the body rigid, the athlete pivots from side to side. “It’s important to squeeze your glutes together and make the body as rigid as possible during this exercise,” says Gagné. “Dr. Mel Siff always told me that the glute is the link between the lower body and the upper body, and this exercise is a great one to strengthen that link.”

Hex Bar Standing Press

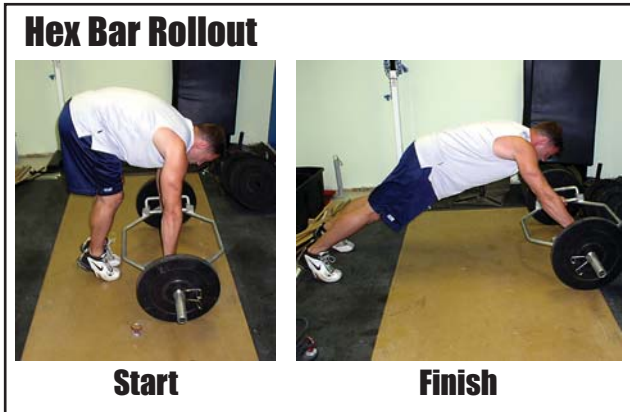
Performing the standing (i.e., military) press with a Hex bar is a good exercise, as it allows for a greater range of motion and its greater stability will allow you to use more weight than you can with two dumbbells. “I actually call this exercise a “W” press because you are able to bring your elbows very low to the side of your body,” says Gagné. Also, I like this exercise because there is less temptation to lean backward as you would if you performed the exercise with a barbell in front of you.”

Hex Bar Standing Press



Start

Finish



Hex Bar Rollout

This exercise is a variation of a barbell exercise the late sports scientist Dr. Mel Siff showed Gagné. In contrast to those wheel-like devices you might see on infomercials, the barbell allows you to greatly—and incrementally—increase the resistance of the exercise. Although the barbell rollout is good, the Hex bar rollout is better. “It works the shoulders, obliques and stabilizing muscles of the lower back harder than a barbell because the Hex bar is more difficult to stabilize,” says Gagné. “The Hex bar rollout is one of the main exercises I use to work the entire abdominal region, especially the rectus abdominus.”

For most athletes, Gagné has them first perform this exercise on their knees, and as they get better, they’ll progress to a standing position. “The key is that when you start from the bottom position, you have to slightly flex your spine and squeeze your glutes tightly. The most common mistake is that people will drop their hips, which could cause discomfort to the lower back.” In addition to increasing resistance, you can make the exercise more difficult and increase tension on the abs by extending the arms, which should occur only after the shoulders have traveled as far forward as possible.

To prevent slipping or collapsing forward, Gagné recommends that you perform this exercise with your feet resting on a rubber pad. Gagné has his athletes perform this exercise on a platform, turning sideways. He says you can spot it by placing your arms under the abdominals, which he says encourages the athlete to tighten their abs. You can also position the bar in front of a barrier, such as a wall, so that the barrier will stop the bar from traveling too far. As the athlete becomes stronger, he or she stands farther away from the barrier.

Hex Bar Overhead Squat

The overhead squat is a standard exercise used by Olympic lifters to improve their catch position in the snatch. Because it is so effective at developing overall lower-body flexibility in the hips, Dr. Greg Shepard recommends it as part of his “power balance” series of exercises. Gagné often starts off athletes with the Hex bar rather than the regular barbell.

“It’s much easier for many athletes to perform the overhead squat with a Hex bar, especially for those athletes who have limited flexibility in the shoulders,” says Gagné. “The Hex bar enables them to sit more erect.”

The best way to perform this exercise is to start from a standing position (removing the bar from a power rack, or even performing it inside a power rack). Assume a squat stance, bend your knees and thrust the weight overhead to straight arms. Now perform a squat, balancing the weight overhead at arms’ length. When you’ve performed the required reps, lower the bar back to the start position and return the weight to the rack. Having someone stand behind you to spot you, especially when you first perform it, is a good safety practice.

Hex Bar Sots Press

A variation of the overhead squat is the Sots press. The Sots press is an exercise named after Victor Sots, the 1982 world champion weightlifter from Russia who could allegedly military press 413 pounds from the full squat position (witnesses at one international competition saw him do 352 pounds in this manner) and push jerk 589 pounds at a bodyweight of 220 pounds. Gagné believes this is a great exercise to develop overall flexibility that will help technique in squats and Olympic lifting exercises.

“As with the overhead squat, perform the Sots press with a Hex bar rather than a barbell. I’ve tried

Hex Bar Sots Press



Start

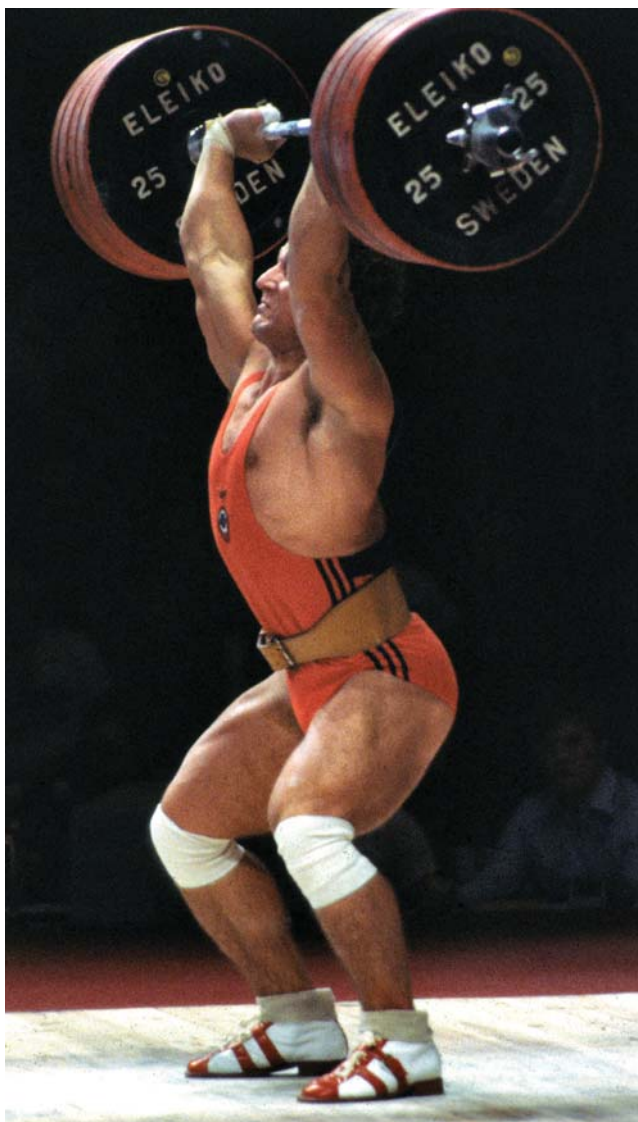
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Hex Bar Power Jump



Start

Finish



Bruce Klemens photo

Victor Sots is a former 220-pound world weightlifting champion from Russia, and the person that the Sots press is named after. He has reportedly military pressed 413 pounds from a full squat position and push jerked 589!

dumbbells with both the overhead press and the Sots variation, but it's difficult because they are so unstable and force the athlete to use a much lighter weight."

The best way to perform this exercise is to start from a standing position (removing the bar from a power rack, or even performing it inside a power rack). Assume a squat stance, bend down as low as possible and then press the weight overhead. As with the Hex bar overhead squat, having someone stand behind you to spot you is a good safety practice.

Hex Bar Power Jump

Gagné prefers performing weighted jumps with a Hex bar instead of a barbell. "When you jump with a bar over your shoulders, there are high levels of compression forces on the spine. This stress is greatly reduced with the Hex bar, and you can use more weight safely than with a squat jump," says Gagné. "Also, with the squat jump your hands are up in the air so you cannot use your traps—the Hex bar jump is a more natural movement, similar to the muscle actions that occur in the Olympic lifts."

Gagné performs the Hex bar power jump by having the athlete hold the barbell as if he or she had just finished a deadlift. From this starting position the athlete bends the knees, jumps while shrugging the shoulders, then lands on flexed knees, and then immediately rebounds for the required number of reps. The arms stay straight throughout the exercise. "I also will perform a variation in which I have the athlete perform rapid short jumps, just flicking the toes and having minimal contact on the ground. With both types of power jumps, I seldom perform more than 10 reps, as the goal is to develop power," says Gagné.

Give a few of these challenging exercises a try in your future workouts. Besides learning specific ways to accomplish your athletic goals, you'll find the variety will make your workouts a bit more fun. It's the MacGyver way! 