

The power of one means different things in different contexts. When it comes to training, it suggests that performing an exercise with one arm or on a single leg at a time has the power to deliver serious strength and aesthetic benefits.

UNILATERAL TRAINING

Harness the power of one

THIS TYPE OF TRAINING IS CALLED UNILATERAL EXERCISE. WORKING THE BODY AND SPECIFIC MUSCLE GROUPS IN THIS WAY CAN ADDRESS STRENGTH OR MUSCLE SIZE IMBALANCES ON EITHER SIDE OF THE BODY TO IMPROVE FUNCTIONAL OR AESTHETIC SYMMETRY.

MODEL: JOSH RUGER

THE ROOT OF IMBALANCES

As far as the human body is concerned, anatomical symmetry is primarily a product of evolution, **because a balanced body moves efficiently and works better.**

However, the real world is dominated by situations that create muscle strength imbalances. We also develop imbalances over the course of our lifetime due to daily activities and various other factors.

For instance, we all have a dominant side of our body. That means we preferentially perform most of our daily tasks using either our right or left arms, or lead predominantly with one leg over the other.

Structural abnormalities and congenital birth defects can also result in imbalances, from **leg-length discrepancies to spinal curvatures** that shift our body weight off axis or misalign our joints.

Our lifestyle also influences the forces we impose on our bodies each day as we spend most of our time in positions or doing tasks that create imbalances, like sitting, slouching, standing with poor posture or exercising with poor form.

We also tend to repeatedly engage in the same activities. **When primary mover muscles and stabilisers aren't strong enough for the demands we place on them, compensatory patterns develop that weaken some muscles and overdevelop others.**

UNILATERAL MOVES



Single-leg Romanian deadlift

HOW TO: **A** Brace your core and place your bodyweight on one leg. Bend at the hip, reaching down to the ground with the kettlebell. Push your hip back and go as low as you can while maintaining a neutral spine. As you do so, extend your 'free' leg straight out behind you. **B** When your back and extended leg are aligned, contract the hamstring and glute of your supporting leg to return to the upright position.

FORM TIP: Do not allow the hip of the 'free' leg to tilt up as you hinge.



Single-arm lateral raise

HOW TO: **A** Stand upright holding one end of a tube or band in one hand and stand on the other end to act as an anchor. **B** With your elbow slightly bent, raise your arm up and out to the side, until your elbow reaches shoulder height.



Standing single-arm overhead tricep extension

HOW TO: **A** Extend your arm holding the band above your head. Lower your forearm to drop the handle or end of the band behind your head by flexing your elbow. **B** Extend your elbow to raise your arm overhead again.

FORM TIP: Keep your elbow close to your head to stop it from flaring out too much.

Single-arm kettlebell curl

HOW TO: **A** Engage your core and keep a slight bend in your knees. Curl your arm up towards your shoulder by flexing your elbow. **B** Pause, then slowly lower the kettlebell back to the starting position.



Single-arm overhead press

HOW TO: **A** Clean and press a kettlebell in the front rack position at your shoulder. With your elbow tucked in at your side, rotate your arm out. **B** Press the kettlebell overhead, then lower it back down to the starting position under control.



UNILATERAL MOVEMENTS ALSO ACTIVATE STABILISERS AND SECONDARY MUSCLES, AS WELL AS THE CORE TO A GREATER DEGREE

Also, weaker supporting structures like tendons and ligaments get called on to do more work when imbalances emerge, which can lead to seriously debilitating injuries like tendinopathies, tears or ruptures.

These factors all add up over time, creating strength imbalances that can lead to differences in muscle size between our left and right sides when we work out in the gym.

And when muscles on one side of the body are stronger than their counterparts (including synergist and antagonist or opposing muscle groups), these imbalances simply become greater when we train them without the correct loading and programming.

STRENGTH BENEFITS

By doing single-side movements before imbalances become too pronounced or injuries occur, or as part of a rehabilitation program, you teach your body how to recruit these weaker or neglected muscles and gets them firing in the correct sequence to improve strength and coordination.

Unilateral movements also activate stabilisers and secondary muscles, as well as the core to a greater degree, which offers additional strength and coordination benefits, while also reducing the risk of other potential injuries that are often associated with imbalances.

Single-leg pistol squat

HOW TO: **A** Balance on one leg with the opposite leg extended and lifted off the floor. Stabilise your ankle and keep your torso upright. Press back with your hips and squat all the way down until your glute reaches the Achilles of the bent leg at the bottom of the movement. Tuck your tailbone in as you squat down and push your arms forward as a counterbalance. **B** Push through your planted foot to extend back up. Do not allow the knee to cave in or fall to the outside during the descent or extension phase. Keep your extended leg straight throughout the movement.

The knee of the loaded leg should point in same direction as the planted foot and should extend past the ankle as far as possible.



FORM TIP: Keep your loaded front knee aligned with the ankle on the same side



Reverse lunge with knee drive

HOW TO: **A** Stand holding a kettlebell on the horns in front of your chest. Lift one leg straight back and make contact with the ground with the toe. Lower your body until the thigh of the front leg is parallel to the floor. **B** Push through the heel of the front leg and engage your glute to bring your back leg forward until you are in the standing position. Drive the knee of that leg forward and up to complete the rep.

Single-leg glute bridge

HOW TO: **A** Lie on your back on a mat with both feet on the ground. Rest your arms on the floor at 45-degree angles from your torso. Extend one leg and hold it up off the floor. Push through the heel of the foot on the floor to raise your hips into the fully extended position. **B** Hold for a count, then return.





Side plank

HOW TO: A

Raise your torso and shift your elbow under your body at a 90-degree angle. Keep your other arm straight and pointed directly upwards. **B** Start with your hip lowered on the mat, then raise it up as far away from the mat as possible. Hold for up to 90 seconds.



Single-leg prone hamstring curl

HOW TO: A

Contract your core stabiliser muscles to ensure your torso and legs form a straight line, with your glutes off the floor to create an extended bridge position. Lift one leg off the ball. **B** Roll the ball towards your body by flexing the knee to draw in your heel. Straighten your leg and return to the starting position.

Single-leg standing calf raises

HOW TO: A

Stand with one foot lifted off the ground. Raise your other heel off the floor by extending your ankle as high as possible. Hold for a count before lowering your heel back down to the floor.



AESTHETIC BENEFITS

As already alluded to, unilateral training can have massive aesthetic benefits.

Adding some unilateral training at the end of a session can deliver serious muscle pumps and better develop lagging body parts by isolating specific muscles.

More focus on an individual muscle also develops the mind-muscle connection, which helps you recruit more muscle fibres and motor units with every contraction.

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

Including a few exercises into your current program is the best way to start enjoying the benefits of unilateral training.

You can include them at the beginning of your workout to target weak or lagging muscle groups, or at the end to fatigue specific muscles. With either technique, maintaining strict form is vital.

Focus on keeping yourself steady and stable in all of the moves, and brace your core and keep as still as possible. This will give your core and abs a serious workout too, all while getting the secondary muscles and stabilisers to come to the party. **LF**