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from the book,**

Back Handsprings: The Secret Techniques

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Round Off: Key to Advanced Tumbling

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Round Off: Key to Advanced Tumbling

(Secret 16)

Throwing yourself through the air on a wing and a prayer is the least effective method for doing a round off back handspring. Safety-wise, it is not an appropriate or helpful method of learning this skill.

Unfortunately, this method is all too common. Most often, what I see is an athlete running down the mat, then setting up the skill with a high hurdle and turning her body in the air as if she is doing a ½ on twist to the vault table. This early turn of the upper body usually results in a tumbling pass that swerves off the diagonal tumbling pass on a crooked path.

I want you to promise to learn the round off correctly. Not only will it make the back handspring easier to do; it will make it more powerful, and it will become a great lead-up skill for adding back somersaults. Sure, some of your friends will be bragging about their (*seizure technique*) round off back handsprings, but in the long run, if you put in the effort now, you will be a significantly better tumbler than the other athletes who cut corners.

“Where did little cartwheels and round offs come from, Coach Rik?”

Popular gymnastics mythology would seem to indicate that cartwheels came from early acrobats imitating the motions of a wheel on a cart, which had two boards crossing each other around which a wheel was placed.

The first cartwheels were completely sideways. Later, the cartwheel became stylized somewhat in that the tumbler may start from a forward facing position, as though she was going to

kick up to a handstand but at the last moment turned sideways to do a front to side cartwheel. Other times the tumbler started sideways but stepped down facing back the way she had come for a side to back cartwheel; still other tumblers combine all three positions and did front-side-back cartwheels. Eventually, and I am just guessing at this point, someone started a front side back cartwheel and accidentally finished with both feet together and the round off was born (*of course, I could be wrong*).

In any case, I am going to have you focus on learning a front-side-back cartwheel as the basis for a correct round off.

Front – Side – Back Cartwheels

- **Drill: Kick to (front) Handstand to & from a T-position.**



Purpose: To teach you that driving your upper body down into a round off is just like kicking into a handstand.

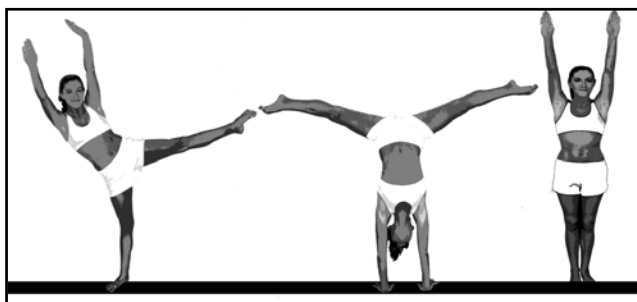
Directions: Starting in a stretch position on the floor, kick into a tight body handstand by moving through a T-position on the way up and as you step back down through an arabesque position to a stretch position.

- **Drill: Side to side cartwheel [both sides]**

Purpose: To develop control of the arms and legs while moving in a lateral or sideways movement pattern.

Set up: Place two or three 8” landing cushions up against the wall, securely fastened, so they don’t fall down.

Directions: The objective is to do a cartwheel completely sideways – no turn out of the lead foot; keep your head in neutral (middle illustration incorrect); do not look in the direction of travel.



- **Canyon drill:** (fun drill)

With the 8” landing mats against the wall (as described above) create a canyon by sliding over a port-a-pit or stacks of panel mats that are higher than you waist. The idea is to do a completely sideways cartwheel in the canyon without touching the mats on either side. After each turn, you will move the mats a little closer together. You have mastered this skill when you can do a side to side cartwheel on the low beam. **Note:** Remember to work this and all cartwheel drills to both right and left sides.

It may be more difficult on your non-dominant side (uncomfortable side) but it will help with bilateral symmetry and possibly open additional bridges between the right and left hemispheres of your brain through the corpus callosum¹. Don’t

¹ The two cerebral hemispheres are partially separated from each other by a deep fold known as the longitudinal fissure. Communication between the two hemispheres is through several concentrated bundles of axons, called commissures, the largest of which is the corpus callosum. Microsoft ® Encarta ® Encyclopedia 2005 © 1993-2004 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

worry about understanding this last paragraph; just pretend it's like vegetables, which are good for you. Eat your vegetables and do your cartwheels on both sides!

- **Drill: Side to side cartwheel hold last leg at horizontal. [both sides]**

Purpose: To teach you how to shift your weight from your upper body to your legs in a controlled manner.

Directions: The same as the side cartwheel except as the



first foot steps down you will quickly lift the head and shoulders (staying sideways) until your weight is above your support leg and the opposite leg is held to the side in a horizontal position. It is important in this drill to keep the support leg straight and not allow the body to pivot. Practice this drill to both sides.

- **Drill: Front to side cartwheel hold last leg up.**



Purpose: To combine the “Front to Handstand,” and “Side to Side,” cartwheel drills.

Directions: The key to this drill is timing. You will kick up as though you are working on a handstand, however, when your fingertips are one inch from the floor you will quickly pivot your body sideways to finish as though you had done a side to side cartwheel [last leg held in horizontal position].

- **Drill: Front to side cartwheel; hold last leg in horizontal 1 second, and then pivot to backward finishing position pulling legs together and snapping chest upright.**

Purpose: To help you focus on the final pivot as this will become the snap down portion of the round off.

Directions: Do a front to side cartwheel as described above and hold the last leg at the horizontal position for one second, and then pivot your body by rotating on the ball of your support leg foot in the direction from which you have come while snapping the leg at horizontal down and together with your support leg.

- **Drill: Front-side-back cartwheel.**



Purpose: This drill is the culmination of the above drills. It is important that each phase of this drill is distinctly shown. Allowing the front side of this drill to blur into the side portion because you turn too early (more than one inch above the floor) will cause you to develop bad habits.

Directions: The same as the above drill except there will be no pause or hold of the leg; you will move through the skill

showing each position but continue to move smoothly to the end, which is a stretch position.

Special Note: Before the second leg closes with the support leg, the head, chest, and arms should already be up in the stretch position. If you have done the skill correctly, you will find that finishing in this position correctly develops some power and may cause you to take a step or two backwards to control the kinetic energy from the momentum of the skill.

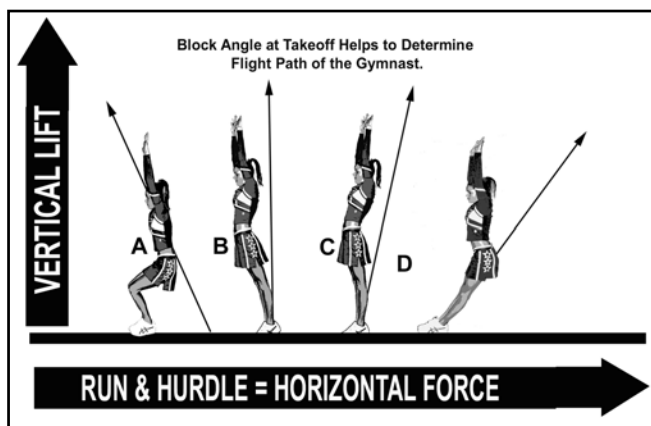
You may notice that I am not including the “run, hurdle, RO” as a drill because I want you to focus on technique and get away from the erroneous thinking that a fast run is necessary.

Importance of the Round Off

The round off is the transitional skill (transfers power from one element to another) from the run and hurdle to back handsprings, somersaults and several other skills. Yet, even with this all-important role the round off is easily one of the most neglected skills from a coaching standpoint.

The position of your body at the end of the snap down from the round off is crucial to the setup of the following skill. If you land with your feet in the “A” position, which is typical for many novice tumblers, you will most likely have little or no power for the next tumbling skill. If you are doing a back handspring from this position, you will most likely buckle your knees on takeoff or gain forward (cause your body to move forward rather than backward) which is not a good takeoff position for back handsprings or any other tumbling skill. The only way for you to get into a back handspring from the “A” position is to buckle (bend) your knees so you can get your center of gravity past the vertical position, which will allow you to travel backwards but will drastically reduce the power of the skill.

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If you snap down with your feet closer to the “B” position, you will certainly transfer more power from the run and hurdle with nice tight legs and good stretch of the upper body, but you will tend to block upward with very little rotation of her body backward. *(At more advanced levels of tumbling, this position may be appropriate for setting somersaulting skills.)*

Moving into a back handspring from block angle “C” can still be a little scary. Although you may land straight up and down on the floor from the snap down of your round off, the horizontal force from takeoff or more forcefully from a hurdle and round off will cause your body to continue rotating backward – just a bit higher in the air than is normally recommended for a competent back handspring.

Block angle “D” would be the ideal takeoff position into the back handspring with straight, tight legs punching through the floor.²

² “B” and to some degree “C” are standard takeoff positions for back somersaults. “C” is typical for novice gymnasts learning back tuck somersaults, although not necessarily ideal. “B” is a good position for setting layout somersaults when combined with a strong horizontal force from the run, hurdle, and round off or a takeoff from a similar position from a back handspring (see illustration page 106).

The following drills emphasize the landing positions needed for training the rebound and for training the transition from round off to the back handspring.

- **Drill: Round off rebound**

Special Note: Once again, this is a skill that falls into the “good to demonstrate one aspect of a technique but not-so-good for the overall skill” category. The one aspect to get is a clean jump-hurdle to front-side-back style round off. (This is good training for a round off into a back tuck somersault.)

Purpose: To teach you that correct technique for a front-side-back round off may be initiated from a stand rather than from an out of control run across the floor.

Directions: Jump from two feet to a hurdle and focus on entering this skill as though you are about to kick up to a handstand. When your hands are inches from the floor, pivot $\frac{1}{4}$ turn, and then pivot another $\frac{1}{4}$ turn at the handstand before squaring your hips to snap down, by blocking off the floor through your shoulders and chest to a hollow position.



In this instance, you do want to execute a controlled rebound that shows some amplitude, so snap down and land with your feet behind your body in position “B” (*see page 8*). The key is in lifting your head and chest quickly from the snap down so you are spotting something at eye level, which will help you to control your balance when landing from the rebound.

Note: This should be a rebound (punch off the floor) and not a bent knee jump into the rebound position.

Spotting/Safety Tip: The chance for over-rotation on the rebound is high for athletes new to this skill. Ask a qualified coach to spot you for possible over-rotation. Review safety landing drills, especially the backwards landing with “rock and roll” technique before practicing this skill on the floor exercise mat.

- **Drill: [From stretch position] One leg at horizontal; drive into F-S-B round off with rebound to stick position.**

Purpose: Similar to the last drill, but instead of a jump to a hurdle, you must now refine the technique even more to do it correctly. Running and jumping should not be a substitute for correct technique.



Directions: From a standing stretch position, you will lift one leg slightly above horizontal and then take a large step forward, driving the upper body down to the ground to initiate a front-side-back round off with a rebound to a stick landing position.

Note: Start this drill on a line on the floor to give yourself feedback about how straight you are tumbling. If you land off to one side or the other of the line, it is likely that you are turning

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too early in the front (or lead up to the handstand) portion of the round off. The lower you can drive your upper body in the handstand kick up portion of the drill, before pivoting your body sideways, the more square your body will be on the line at the finish of the skill. **Ask your coach to spot the rebound, if necessary.**



For more information about the round off, especially how to effectively connect it to the back handspring or use it as a set up for a back tuck, get your copy of **“Back Handsprings: The Secret Techniques,”** available at:

<http://tinyurl.com/2cntyh>
(Deary’s Gymnastics Supply)

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