The Grappler: The Reinvention of an Old Training Modality

Vilayat "Sean" Del Rossi, CSCS, "D, NSCA-CPT

Back in the days of the dark and dingy hole in the wall gyms and training facilities, exercisers and athletes alike became creative in how they would train. Trainers, coaches and lifters would come up with hundreds of ways to utilize the dumbbell and barbell. The original grappler exercise was very simple and rudimentary. A lifter would take a 20 kg (45 lb) barbell, and place one end of it on the floor at a diagonal corner of a wall in the facility. The lifter would then use the wall as an anchor/stripper and then grab the other end of the bar and perform t-bar rows and shoulder presses. Because the barbell was not in a fixed position, the surface it was pushing up against would get damaged. Essentially a hole in the wall would be produced and the lifters would then move on to destroy another wall.

In today's training setting, what is old is new again, with a twist. This article will cover an old training method that has been reintroduced with a twist, literally. The grappler, now has been reintroduced to perform multi-planar exercises utilizing an Olympic bar and a new home plate device that the 20 kg bar can insert into a sleeve to improve stability and versatility.

The grappler is a versatile training tool, all that is needed to put it into practice is a little creativity and to focus on the basic athletic ground based movements. The purpose of this article is to assist an individual in how to utilize the grappler modality in progressing from basic exercises to more advanced exercises and some program design complexes. Please remember that the exercises derived from the grappler are for an experienced lifter.

Versatility of the Grappler

There are three major points of benefits or versatility that the grappler has:

• Multi-planar movement—allowing movement on all three of the planes.

• Ground based in all the three foot positions—all ground based movements derive from three foot
positions, parallel stance, staggered stance, and one leg. One leg stance will not be an example in this article.

• Push/Pull—these movements allow the lifter to train opposing muscle groups, sometimes in the same exercise complex.

Most barbell, dumbbell, and even band exercises allow this as well. But the grapple is a little different because the distal end of the bar is fixed and allows any type of movement from its ground-based pivot point.

Exercise Progressions
The following will cover some of the basic beginning, intermediate, and advanced exercises. The exercises will progress with complexity, speed of movement, and changes in foot position. There will be a few examples of exercises in each category. It is not an exhaustive list, but it can get a person started on how to progress exercises. All movements should be performed with a 45 lb or 35 lb bar before progressing with weight. Use of Olympic bumper plates is recommended to standardize starting positions as well as preparation for a missed lift.

Beginning Exercises
These movements are basic weight training exercises, performed using a new modality. Start here to accustom yourself to the ellipse movement that the grapple provides.

T-Bar Row
Straddle the bar near the far end, maintaining a straight back, with the knees flexed. Reach over and grab the bar and pull it towards your midsection. The torso should be parallel to the bar (Figure 1).

Shoulder Press
In an athletic stance, the bar is resting at shoulder level. With a firm grip, push the bar towards the ceiling, primarily on the sagittal plane (Figure 2).

Squat
The starting position of this exercise is actually where we define the parallel or down position of the normal squat. While in the down position, grab the bar at hip level and proceed to lift the bar while keeping the arms completely extended until the body is in an upright position (Figures 3 and 4).

Intermediate Exercises
These movements are a bit more challenging from the previous beginning exercises because they involve more joint actions.

Deadlift
From a parallel stance in front of the bar, maintaining a straight back with the knees flexed, pick the bar up to the starting position. From here, flex the hips as the plate is lowered to the floor. Raise the bar back up to the starting position to begin the next repetition (Figures 5 and 6).

Squat Press
Begin in a parallel squat stance with the hips and knees flexed in the parallel or bottom position of the squat. The arms should be holding the bar at shoulder level. From this position extend the hips and knees, coming up in the concentric phase of the squat. At the top of the squat the arms will press the bar fully overhead (Figures 7 and 8).

Half Rainbow
Begin in a staggered foot position in relationship to the bar. The bar should be sitting just above the trailing leg. An alternating hand grip is used with this exercise, and corresponds with the foot position. The back hand should have a supinated grip and the front hand a pronated grip. As you extend out of the squat position, the bar will ascend in an ellipse to the opposite shoulder. During the whole movement the arms should be fully extended (Figures 9 and 10).

Advanced Exercises
These movements have progressed to the most complex or challenging exercises. They have a high degree of difficulty because they incorporate the explosive nature of the clean and jerk, as well as incorporating a release movement in some instances, such as with the clean and press. Please be careful when proceeding to these exercises.
Power Clean and Press

Begin in the starting position for a clean. The feet should be parallel to each other and perpendicular to the end of the bar. The hands should grip the bar in a neutral closed double grip. Proceed through the first pull and transition/scoop still gripping bar. As you progress through the second pull, release your grip and catch the bar in the catch position (pronating the hands). Finally perform the press and move the bar overhead to complete the lift (Figures 11, 12, and 13).

One-Arm Power Clean and Jerk

Begin in the starting position for a clean, close to full squat. The feet should be parallel to each other and diagonal to the end of bar. The end of bar should be half the distance between both legs. Perform the first pull and transition in the same foot position. When progressing through to the second pull, square the foot position in relationship to the bar to prepare for the catch. Once the bar has reached the catch position, prepare for the split jerk. When performing the split jerk, the foot that goes forward is the side of the body that the bar is on (Figures 14, 15, and 16).

Program Design

Traditional program design for the above exercises should be based on your goals. For muscular endurance training, the load should be ≤67 % of 1RM with a goal of ≥12 repetitions. For hypertrophy training, the load should be 67 – 85 % of 1RM with a goal of 6 – 12 repetitions. Finally for muscular strength or power training, the load should be ≥85% of 1RM with a goal of ≤6 repetitions (1).

That would be the traditional way to set-up the exercises and integrate them into a resistance training program. Since the grapper modality is so versatile, you can do several exercises one after the other utilizing the same load and never have to move to another piece of equipment. The following is an example of an Advanced Metabolic Circuit (AMC). An AMC would be good for cardiovascular orientated athletes such as runners, as well as the intermittent cardiovascular athletes such as basketball and soccer players. Below is a list of exercises in a modified Tabata protocol (2). The load should be approximately 50% of 1RM with a work to rest ratio of 20 seconds to 10 seconds between each exercise. The AMC is designed to be a four minute circuit. The exercises should be performed in circuit fashion, one after the other with a three to four minute rest period in between circuits. The AMC will be repeated four to six times, depending on conditioning level. There are no defined repetition ranges, just timed intervals. With that in mind, there is extra attention on completing repetitions in proper form and speed. The exercises should be performed in the following order:
• Half Rainbow—Left to Right
• Half Rainbow—Right to Left
• Squat
• One Arm Power Clean and Jerk—Left Arm
• One Arm Power Clean and Jerk—Right Arm
• Deadlift
• Power Clean and Press
• Squat Press

Conclusion
In conclusion, the grappler is only one training modality, but it is an extremely versatile tool. This article has given you some ideas on how to apply the modality with some exercise progressions as well as sample program design. Hopefully it will add to your tool box of acceptable modalities and exercises. Do not forget to consult with a qualified professional (NSCA-CPT or CSCS) before trying to incorporate the exercises and program design shown in this article.

References
Figure 14. One Arm Power Clean & Jerk (Start Position)

Figure 15. One Arm Power Clean & Jerk (Catch Position)

Figure 16. One Arm Power Clean & Jerk (Finish Position)