

Showcase Legs for Women

By Erick Minor

My work with elite sprinters allows me to attend several collegiate track meets each year. I also attend a few bodybuilding and fitness shows every year as well. I'm always amazed at the superior leg development (mainly posterior chain) of female sprinters compared to figure and fitness competitors. Maybe it's my bias towards the female athlete, but I rarely see athletes from fitness and figure who have achieved lower body development on par with 100 to 800 meter sprinters. Many of you may think it's all genetic, but I think not. Yes, sprinting is an excellent leg developer, but I believe the primary reason for the disparity between sprinters and fitness/figure competitors is due to the exercise selection and execution. Even at the pro level, figure competitors are far behind in posterior chain development of a collegiate track athlete. Why? At the collegiate and professional level, female athletes perform the same primary exercises that their male teammates perform; the primary exercise being the barbell back squat. This main exercise is often monitored under the guidance of a qualified strength coach. This is not the case when it comes to mainstream gyms. A few times a year I visit a commercial gym to see what's going on. I rarely see any ladies performing barbell squats and if they are squatting; their form is usually less than optimal. This is a travesty and it needs to change.



IF YOU FIND THIS LEVEL OF GLUTE AND LEG DEVELOPMENT UNAPPEALING; THIS ARTICLE IS NOT FOR YOU.

For those ladies who want an exception pair of legs and show stopping glutes; I have a workout that can get the ball rolling. The only requirement is that you commit to pushing yourself to the limit and do all you can to master the barbell back squat and split squat.

THE EXERCISES

Exercises can be watched on youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/user/erickminor?feature=mhum>

Barbell Back Squat – wide stance

- Barbell back squats should be performed inside of a well built power rack. (Video is outside of rack for demo only)
- Adjust bar holders so that barbell is a few inches below clavicle when standing up.
- Make sure that you can clear the bar holders easily when un-racking and racking the barbell.
- Set safety catches a few inches below your maximum squat depth. This is very important in case you cannot complete another repetition; you can safely sit the barbell on the safety catches.

- Grasp bar a couple of inches outside of shoulder width; once grip is set, do not move hands.
- Step under barbell and place the bar on the middle of your trapezius muscle; keep shoulder blades squeezed together. This creates a solid platform for the bar. Do not allow upper back to relax at any time.
- Lift barbell off rack and take a couple of steps back so you are in the center of the power rack and in order to clear the bar holders.
- Set feet wider than hip width with toes slightly turned out. I prefer a wider stance which allows for more squat depth while maintaining a neutral lumbar position.
- Keep upper back tight, elbows pointing down, and eyes forward (away from mirror if possible)

- Brace abdominals to achieve a stiff torso.
- Initiate descent by breaking at the hip and sitting back, shifting weight towards the heels of foot and pushing knees out to maintain kneecap over the top of foot. The knees should not drop inside of the feet or bow out excessively.
- Inhale as you begin your descent, hold breath through the bottom position of squat, and slowly exhale as you rise to the start position.
- Optimal squat depth is achieved when calves and hamstrings make contact, but this must be achieved while maintaining a strong upper back position (shoulders back, chest up, eyes forward) and heels flat on the floor.

- Feet should remain flat on the floor throughout squat
- For women with relatively long upper legs who can't keep heels flat on the floor throughout the squat, you may place a 1 inch platform under heels or buy a pair of Olympic weightlifting shoes (which have a wedge built-in). Weightlifting shoes are a great investment for any serious trainee.
- Over time, you should gain the lower leg range of motion to perform a full squat flat footed; if not, see a qualified professional to help with lower leg strength and range of motion.

Split Squat – dumbbell

- Grasp a pair of dumbbells. Keeping arms straight and pinned to your sides.
- Step forward into a split stance with feet far enough apart so that the trailing upper leg is perpendicular to the floor during the descent.
- Keep chest up and eyes forward during eccentric and concentric range of motion.
- Drop straight down until your trailing leg brushes the floor.
- Return to top position while maintaining split stance.

THE WORKOUT

Before we hit the primary exercises, I recommend a specific warm-up that will facilitate proper execution of the barbell back squat.

Hip and lower leg General Warm-up

1. Single leg Calf Raise

2 X 15 reps

Place ball of foot on platform and drop heel until a full stretch in the calf, rise up as high as possible. Repeat for prescribed number of repetitions.

2. One Leg Hip Flexion – Supine on Bench

2 X 10-12 repetitions

Lie supine of a flat bench with sacrum close to the edge of bench. Keep one knee bent with foot flat on ground. Keep working leg completely straight with foot dorsi-flexed. Lift leg as high as possible until you feel a mild stretch in hamstring. Keep abs tight and maintain a neutral lumbar spine position.

3. Lateral Lunge

2 X 10-12 repetitions

Take a very wide stance with feet pointed straight ahead.

Sit back on heels, keep chest up with arms extended in front.

Squat back and maintain low position until the completion of all reps

Main Workout

Monday and Thursday

A. Full Back Squats (3010 tempo)

Warm-up sets: 2 Reps: 10

Work sets: 3 Reps: 10-12 Rest: 60 - 120 seconds between sets

1st work set use a moderate load for 12 full reps, 2nd work set use 12 RM until technical failure, 3rd work set decrease load by 5-8% and do as many reps as possible until technical failure

Notes: Technical Failure is the point at which you can no longer maintain optimal joint/ torso mechanics.

Do not pause between the concentric and eccentric portion of the repetition (no rest at start position)

B1. Split Squat w/ dumbbells (2010 tempo)

Sets: 2-4 Reps: 10-12 Rest: 60- 120 seconds between B1 and B2

Start with weaker leg. Use the maximum amount of weight for the prescribed number of repetitions.

B2. Single Leg Curl – prone – foot dorsiflexed (2010 tempo)

Sets: 2-4 Reps: 10-12 per leg Rest: 60 - 120 seconds between B2 and B1

D. Back Extension – Horizontal (2011 tempo)

Sets: 3 Reps: 12-15 Rest: 60 – 120 seconds between sets

Keep chest up and low back flat. Initiate movement by squeezing glutes together. Hold for 1 second at the top of each repetition.

Perform this workout twice a week with at least 2 days rest between leg workouts. Train upper body 1-2 days/week as well.

Keys to Success:

1. Perform each workout twice weekly.
2. Follow this routine for 4 weeks before moving to a new program
3. Increase training work load 2.5 – 10 lbs each week.

A well conditioned female with ideal body fat (less than 20%) should strive to perform 1 times bodyweight for 10 full squats. So a 130lb female should strive for 10 reps with 130lb barbell.

I've trained female sprinters who can easily squat 1.5 times bodyweight for 10 full squats.



Erick Minor is a professional strength coach and soft tissue therapist. He is the owner of Strength Studio Inc, a private training studio located in Fort Worth Texas. His clientele range from Olympic athlete to complete beginners. To find out more about Erick and his services, go to www.strengthstudio.com