Teaching Front Handsprings
From a Developmental Approach

by Steve Stork

The front handspring is an important gymnastics skill that serves as a transition from beginner-level rolling and static balances to more advanced tumbling. It is, therefore, a skill highly desired by beginners. Early learning requires a great deal of effort during which students experience many failed attempts. Unless they are highly motivated, early failure can lead some students to cease trying. The purpose of this article is to describe how the front handspring might be taught in a way that contributes to early success.

The front handspring is not technically complex. It requires receipt of one’s body weight on the hands while the legs swing at sufficient speed to lift that weight back to the feet. The skill does, however, require practice and some experience. The progression described below is probably not appropriate for children in early elementary physical education. However, older children (middle school & junior high), due to more developed strength and coordination, might benefit from the progression in physical education as an extension of learning at earlier grade levels. Regardless of age, prior to introducing the progression, it is helpful if students have mastered a stable handstand (straight body, held for 2-3 seconds) and cartwheel (maintaining extension throughout the skill).

Success In and Through the Progression

The progression (see Figure 1, opposite) aids learning in two ways. It makes the learner feel safe and it provides a sense of objective improvement. If a student is unsuccessful while learning a handspring, the result is an ungracious and uncomfortable fall to the back. A common protective mechanism, motivated by self-preservation, is to bring the chest up early and tuck the legs. Instead of landing in a stretched, arched body shape, the result is a low squat on the heels. Progressive development of the handspring makes it possible for the learner to feel safe maintaining the stretched body, leading to a more positive habit.

Objective Improvement

The opportunity to cite objective improvement is an important measure of success in any skill. In other words, the learner must have a means of accurately discerning improvement. Objective improvement can be observed when the learner simply throws handsprings, but not without personal consequences: rose off the hands . . . then fell; landed with a stretched body . . . then fell; landed on heels . . . then fell, etc. The only way to reduce some of this falling is through extensive spotting. However, as the teacher physically assists students in each skill attempt, the performer never knows exactly how much the spotter contributed to the result, reducing the opportunity to cite objective improvement.

The challenge is to provide lead-up tasks, or a progression, that allows students to practice safely on their own (or with minimal assistance). A well-planned progression contributes to a sense of objective improvement by providing students with enjoyable yet challenging tasks that look and feel more and more like the desired outcome.

The Front Handspring Progression

The front handspring can be broken into three phases: Approach, Support/Spring, and Landing. The progression that follows consists of several tasks for each phase (see Figure 1 on the following pages). This is followed by tasks that simplify execution of the “whole” skill.

The nature of this progression presents natural challenges, that students can perform safely without extensive spotting. Of course, the physical educator must exercise due vigilance and introduce new levels of difficulty only when students have demonstrated competency with earlier levels. However, many students respond quite enthusiastically to perceived risks (such as the straight body fall) and loud noises (kick the wall). To maintain interest in the learning process, overlap tasks related to the different phases (see Figure 2, page 27). Students need not necessarily complete the entire skill in order to derive satisfaction. Students in physical education may likely be satisfied with the sensation of the skill, what it “feels like” to perform it. Finally, the teacher can use the steps of the progression to report objective improvement to parents. The entire learning process becomes more meaningful when the lead-ups are completed without direct assistance from the teacher.
**Approach Phase**

### Handstand

| Kick to a handstand, maintaining a straight line from thumbs to the leading heel. | **Refinements:**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place fingertips as close as possible to wall/mat. Maintain a straight line from thumbs to heel. Keep head down. Don’t look at the wall. Touch shoulders, buttocks, and heels to wall at the same time. Maintain strong arms for control.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kick to a handstand at the wall. Shoulders, buttocks, and heels should all contact the wall (softly) at the same time.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place a mat against the wall. Try to get a small bounce off the wall by contacting the wall with the whole body at once.</td>
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### Kick the wall

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place a thick mat against the wall. Increase the speed of the kick while maintaining control of the torso (no arch). The purpose is to hit the wall as hard as possible with the whole body so it bounces off the mat. (Make sure the mat extends high enough to prevent heels from striking the actual wall.)</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| **Refinements:**
| Same as above |

### Support/Spring Phase

#### Shoulder shrugs – Upright

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>While standing or kneeling, raise arms overhead. Elevate and depress shoulder complex.</th>
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| **Refinements:**
| Work only with shoulders. Do not bend elbows. |

#### Cat backs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>On hands and knees, arch back (through torso only) and bring shoulder blades together. Then, round back (upward) and push into ground as shoulder blades come away from each other.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feel the shoulder blades come together and apart.</td>
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#### Shoulder shrugs – In handstand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At the wall, or with a partner, kick to a handstand. Elevate and depress shoulder complex.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In handstand, do not arch during the shoulder depression.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Handstand hops

Kick to a straight-body handstand. Near vertical, push quickly from the shoulders to make a hop. Should finish in straight-body handstand at or near vertical.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Refinements:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delay push until near vertical. (Younger students have a tendency to slap the floor, then kick up to the handstand, resulting in no hop.) Finish with tight, straight body. (Students have a tendency to relax on the landing.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Pop-out cartwheels, generally preceded by leg-together, then fast cartwheels.

- **Leg-together cartwheel:** Perform a cartwheel. At vertical, bring legs quickly together and apart. This should be done without actually stopping at vertical. Rather, speed should be maintained through to the landing.

- **Fast cartwheel:** Generate speed with the lead leg in order to perform a very fast turn-over on the cartwheel. Legs remain far apart during the cartwheel.

- **For the pop-out, begin with a fast cartwheel.** At vertical, instead of bringing legs together and apart, make a strong push from the shoulders. This should create a rise and allow rotation for a more upright landing.

### Handstand-hop up to straight body fall

Approach a skill cushion (8 - 10” of soft foam). Kick toward a handstand with a strong, quick leg drive. Just prior to vertical, execute a strong shoulder push to hop off hands. Continue past vertical. Maintain a straight body and land on back.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The purpose is to isolate the shoulder push which, in the context of the whole skill, provides lift.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Refinements:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place fingertips as close as possible to the mat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stop feet at vertical. Momentum will carry the body past vertical into the fall. However, if the feet drive past vertical, it either creates an arch, or the legs are accelerated so they hit the mat well before the shoulders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Push from the shoulders, not the arms (or elbows). Feel the rise; then land shoulders, buttocks, and heels on the mat all at the same time. Do not look at the landing. Keep eyes on hands (thumbs).</td>
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| Gradually raise height of landing surface. |
| As height increases, remind students to keep arms up and thumbs together. This is so they can catch themselves if the push is insufficient to get on top of the mat. |

(continued)
### Landing Phase

#### Straight body falls

Approach a skill cushion (8-10” of soft foam). Place hands on floor and kick toward a handstand with just enough force to attain vertical. Fall forward out of the handstand with a straight body so shoulders, buttocks, and heels land on the mat all at the same time.

**Refinements:**
- Place fingertips close to the mat.
- Stop feet at vertical. It won't be a complete stop, but feet should stretch upward through vertical in order to maintain a straight body during the fall.
- Do not look at the landing. Keep eyes on hands (thumbs). Looking at the mat creates an arch and/or may cause an awkward landing on the head.

### Arch away from wall

Sit on floor with back to wall, feet flat on the floor, and hands flat on wall behind shoulders. Perform a body wave that begins in the knees, is followed by the hips and torso, and ends in a stand with arms pushing away from the wall.

**Refinements:**
- Make the body wave in the correct order: Knees, hips, shoulders, push.
- Look back at hands during the push away from the wall.

### Handstand hop over trapezoid

Approach a barrel or mailbox mat appropriate to the height of the student. (The barrel should be just a bit higher than the length of the arms.) Execute a handstand-hop in which the student falls over the barrel. The barrel should roll with the student, allowing a feet-first landing. If there is insufficient push from the shoulders, the student simply lands on top of the barrel.

**Refinements:**
- Place fingertips close to the mat.
- Stop feet at vertical and push quickly with the shoulders.
- Watch thumbs as you roll over the trapezoid to your feet. Caution: There is a tendency to pull the arms up and raise the head to look forward to the landing. This causes the student to sit on the trapezoid. This action often causes the barrel to roll backwards. Therefore, during the first few attempts, a spotter may be necessary to protect the performer until this tendency is overcome.

The challenge at this point is to attempt handsprings over the barrel without touching it. The barrel pushes the hips upward, much like a spotter would. Also, if the student lands incorrectly, the barrel slows down the resulting fall to the floor.

Cautions at this point are (1) If the student allows shoulders to run into the barrel, it rolls away and is no help. (2) If this step is introduced too early, students have a tendency to arch at vertical and not push from the shoulders, resulting in a very awkward and potentially dangerous position (as shown in drawing).
### Front handspring

#### Off end of mat

Performing handsprings off the end of a couple folded panel mats reduces long run-ups (which increase forward momentum while reducing control of the upward push) and places the landing lower than the take-off (reducing the perceived need for a big arch). In other words, the handspring is easier when feet land lower than the take-off surface.

#### Across mat (up and over)

Performing handsprings over a folded mat forces the student to make a stronger kick, while maintaining the advantage of a lower landing surface.

#### Across mat (up, across, and over)

Performing handsprings across a wider surface forces the student to maintain a stretch in the torso, contributing to a straighter body.

Refinements: Reach out with hands to maintain stretch in the shoulders
Reach forward with hips on the landing to maintain a dynamic arch.

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**FIGURE 1** Success in and through progression.

**Possible sequence**

- Upright shoulder shrugs
- Cat backs
- Handstand
- Straight body falls
- Kick the wall
- Shoulder shrugs in handstand
- Handstand hops
- Pop-out cartwheels
- Handstand hop **up** to straight body fall
- Arch away from wall
- Handstand hop over trapezoid
- Handspring off end of folded mat (landing lower than takeoff)
- Handspring across a folded mat (up and over)
- Handspring across a skill cushion (up, across, and over)
- Handspring

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**FIGURE 2** Students benefit from practicing tasks from all three phases throughout the learning process.