

# Snaking Your Way to a Better Back

By Jason Erickson

(Text updated from May 2005, pic and vid clips unchanged)

Like many people, I've had my share of back problems. Some were from sports injuries, some from lousy sitting posture at work, and others from sheer bad luck. It's frustrating to wake up stiff as a board and feel limited by my back. Fortunately, there are many ways to undo the stiffness and damage to recover lost movement potential.

For daily maintenance, the Intu-Flow program from RMAX is enough for most people to rebuild lost mobility and prevent future problems. It is the foundation of my training and recovery efforts, and I'm happy about what it has done for me and my clients. It is an ideal way to set the stage for more ambitious recovery.

Sometimes I push too hard and an old sore spot reminds me that it needs more work. (Maybe this is where the old saying, "Three steps forward, two steps BACK," comes from.) When this happens, it's time to address the issue directly. In this article, I will focus on two exercises I developed to improve my backward flexion in the standard Cobra position: the Rattlesnake and the Striking Cobra.



The traditional Cobra pose is a nice tool for opening the hips, spine, and the entire front of your body, improving your ability to perform various types of bridging. The goal is to achieve maximal backward flexion with minimal tension and no discomfort. Notice the packed shoulder position, the straight elbows, and how the hips are solidly down while the head is up. Consider it a goal. If you can't get into a good Cobra without back discomfort, read on.

## **The Rattlesnake:** "Shake your tail" to improve suppleness.

- Start lying down on your belly, head turned to side and arms at sides.
- Roll your shoulders back and into closed-packed position.
- Bend your elbows and let your forearms come palms-up under your chest, hands together. Let your upper body rise onto your elbows in the process. Look straight ahead or somewhat upwards. Keep solid closed-packed shoulder position through the rest of the exercise.
- Keeping your feet together, rotate your heels from side to side. Start slow and gradually speed up, making sure both heels move toward the same side at all times.
- As your heels drop to each side, exhale. As they return to center, passively inhale. If your breathing is relaxed and coordinated properly, you can go quite fast without running short of air or tensing up. This is a vibration drill, and breath integration is critical to maximum effectiveness.
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- After 10-20 seconds, pause, exhale deeply and use forearm rotation to straighten your arms and raise your upper body. This is done by rotating your palms downward as your arms extend. Hold for 5-10 seconds, exhaling further if you can. Reverse the forearm rotation as your arms bend and allow a passive inhalation as your body returns to the lower position.
- Repeat the vibration and the pause to come up 3-5 times. Each time you come up should be easier and more comfortable, even at higher elevations.

### Here's the complete Rattlesnake:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEAsWY8SGeE>

## The Striking Cobra: 3-dimensional movement for recovering back mobility

- Start lying down on your belly, head turned to side and arms at sides.
- Roll your shoulders back and into closed-packed position.
- Bend your elbows and let your forearms come palms-up under your chest, hands apart and slightly forward of your shoulders. Let your upper body rise onto your elbows in the process. Look straight ahead or somewhat upwards. Keep solid closed-packed shoulder position, feet together and hips firmly down through the rest of the exercise.
- Exhale deeply and use forearm rotation to straighten your arms and raise your upper body. This is done by rotating your palms downward as your arms extend. Hold for 5-10 seconds, exhaling further if you can.
- Reverse the forearm rotation on one side to let that arm bend, so that your body moves to that side and down. Allow a passive inhale as your body straightens downwards.
- As you near bottom, allow the other arm to rotate and bend as you start to straighten the first arm. This will drive your body through the low position to the other side.
- Continue the motion by screwing both arms straight and return to the upright position as you exhale deeply. As you start to feel discomfort, begin your descent as described above rather than forcing your way into pain at the top. Start slow and gradually speed up.
- As your comfort level increases, gradually move your hands under your shoulders. As they get closer to your shoulders, you increase the maximum height of the top position. I found that moving my hands in gradually while maintaining the movement worked better than stopping and moving my hands.
- Change directions from a pause in top position, and use gravity to create the new dynamic.
- Your body should remain as relaxed as possible, with gravity and the screwing action of the arms driving the entire movement. Letting the movement breath you to maximize effectiveness and prevent getting out of breath.
- Your body moves in an elliptical pattern. Changing the position of your hands alters the three-dimensional potential of the ellipse.
- I recommend 10-20 seconds in one direction followed by 10-20 seconds in the other direction. Three to five sets of both directions should enable some major improvements in the course of a single session.
- **CAUTION: Use the arm screwing as described to prevent shearing on the elbow joints and excessive arm exertion. This is NOT a tricep exercise, though you may get a nice little pump from a few minutes of it. Correct use of the arms is essential for best results.**

### Here's the complete Striking Cobra:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pY1anUth3DM>

The Rattlesnake and Striking Cobra take a little practice to master, but they do a great job releasing tension in the hips, buttocks, and all along the spine. They are maximally effective when you perform them in the order presented and integrate all of the Circular Strength Training principles and fine points as described above.

**NOTE: Please obtain a proper diagnosis and medical clearance to perform these exercises if you have a new back problem and/or a history of chronic back pain. These exercises are contraindicated for some conditions and should be practiced with due caution. Train smart and own the consequences of your training decisions.**

#### About the author:

Jason Erickson, CST, ACE-PT, NCTMB has been teaching Circular Strength Training since 2004. A personal trainer, yoga instructor, and massage therapist, he works with clients of all ages and levels of ability. He can be found at [www.CSTMinnesota.com](http://www.CSTMinnesota.com).

