OPINION PIECE:
WHAT IS “FUNCTIONAL MOVEMENT”? 

Welcome to a crowded and very passionate conversation in the Fitness Industry, where the dominant flow has been around the meaning of Functional Movement and Training. This conversation has led to the development of a myriad of new types of equipment and techniques - that have literally transformed the world of fitness over the last quarter of a century.

Maybe I’m overstating it, maybe I’m not. But from where I sit, it looks to be spreading powerfully even into the Allied Health and Medical worlds! Injury Specialists are signing up in droves for Functional Movement and Conditioning workshops, and of course Doctors around the globe are talking about ‘exercise as a prescription / as a form of medicine’ (almost laughable isn’t it? - next they’ll be prescribing oxygen for city slickers!).

Anyway, fitness is moving away from artificial movements and equipment types, towards a true functionality for humans who live, work and exercise. Humans who increasingly get niggling aches and pains related to excessive sitting and poor health.

A HELICOPTER RIDE TO SEE THE FOREST OF “FUNCTIONAL MOVEMENT TRAINING”

So, in this article I would like to firstly helicopter high over the conversation, and break down three components that we understand to be Functional Movement Training:

1. FUNCTIONAL GOALS
2. FUNCTIONAL EQUIPMENT
3. FUNCTIONAL BIOMECHANICS

Once we have hovered over the ideas, a future article will dive deep into our Screening System that reveals Dysfunctional Biomechanics. This is taught in a 3-hour face to face workshop within 2-day Rehab FX course delivered internationally in a face-to-face format.

The main point is that not everything is “Functional Movement”! It’s easy to fake it by going with the latest fad, looking super fit or becoming strong or supple, or creating very complex training plans for clients.

If however you seek to be true to these three principles or ideas, then you will be getting pretty close to pure ‘Functional Movement’ (and that’s all we can ever aim for right?). Pretty close is good enough, as long as you keep your client’s best function as your highest priority, not your ego’s need to be right every time or to have a massive DOMs hit after every session.
Ok, cut to the chase: How will you truly improve the Functional Movement Fitness of your clients?

Let’s now look at the three concepts or principles which, if adhered to, will deliver Functional Movement Training:

1. **FUNCTIONAL GOALS**: The fitness goals must be truly Meaningful to your Clients’ Needs – from an elite swimmer or group exercise leader, right through to your mum / dad or elderly woman staying fit to lift kids around and live independently. “Movement with Meaning” sums it up perfectly as my friend and fellow Rehab Trainer educator Wayne Rodgers says so poignantly in an article of his I love (Functional Training: Enhanced Performance or Circus Acts?).

   You can extend this principle as far as you want, in order to create direction for your client programmes - And what will suit one client, may actually harm another (TRUE). Theoretically, a body builder may find the Bench Press extremely “functional” to his training needs requiring isolation of the pectoral muscles, however a footballer or tennis player would likely regress into poor upper body function and injury on the field or court with that as his main ‘pushing exercise’. The examples are endless of Functional training for one client potentially being Dys-functional training for another!

2. **FUNCTIONAL TOOLS**: A Training Programme or Equipment or Understanding that allows the kinetic links of the body to move freely, thereby optimizing load distribution across many body segments and enhancing mind-body connection of client. The best example is the difference between fixed machines and free moving dumbbells. However, much debate could be had about whether Kettlebells are superior to Dumbbells? And whether the Vipr is better or worse for functional movement than the Powerbags?

   What we can be sure of is that different clients will mean different needs and requirements for functionality: from the flexibility of yoga, through to motivation from group fitness for many with normal self-limiting beliefs, through to arm dynamic strength of battling ropes, through to whole body lifting capacity of Power Bags, to the adaptability and versatility of Suspension Training, and the super sports conditioning capacity of Kettlebells. My favourite teachers and providers of these tools are our partners Dan and Tarek of the Functional Training Institute, and Owen of Crankit Fitness. These guys are constantly laterally thinking how fitness tools can be modified to be more ‘functional’ and then taught to the Fitness Industry.
A functional training program and accompanying new language that I would endorse would be “Kinetic Link Training” by Wayne Rodgers – a great tool for Functional Exercise Prescription.

3. **FUNCTIONAL BIOMECHANICS**: Forget “What’s your PB for 5 k’s?” and think instead “How is your client running?” Forget “Can you squat 150 kg’s?” and instead ask about load distribution, joint control and lumbar spine safety. Same goes for push-ups, overhead press, lunges, etc, etc? With every exercise or movement, the question here is all about biomechanical capability and functionality of joints and muscles working synergistically to ensure ideal movement.

So, to know whether a movement is biomechanically functional you have to carry out a simple screening assessment to face the reality that *most clients are not biomechanically functional in their movement*. Despite having ‘meaningful’ exercise and fitness goals set for them, and that they have access to the right ‘fitness tools’, they invariably have some parts of their body that are simply not moving ‘functionally’. This relates to how we understand the optimal function and synergy of joints and muscles, from our vast heritage of anecdotal and research-based evidence.

So, without overstating things let’s be absolutely clear: nearly early every client has some level of dys-Functional Biomechanics negatively affecting their movement during their Functional Movement Training.

In the next article we look at how to effectively screen which clients have parts of their system that are unsafe to fly into a fitness program.

There are three layers of dysfunction that can easily be assessed in order to highlight to clients what they need to start to work on – see you next time in “How do you know if your client sucks at Functional Movement?”