

The title '101 cartwheels' is rendered in a large, bold, black font. The '0' is a circle with a grid pattern. Above the '101' is a diagram of a handstand with a grid pattern. To the right of the '101' is a circular diagram showing a handstand with arrows indicating movement directions. The word 'cartwheels' is in a large, bold, black font with a grid pattern.

*by Toby Towson*

This title is a misnomer, because actually there are many more than 101 cartwheels. In fact, the variety is endless, and there are an infinite number of possible cartwheels restricted only by lack of imagination. This article will discuss one of many approaches to teaching cartwheels and also give a framework for exploring all the possible variations of the basic cartwheel.

To begin, we need a good healthy body with some flexibility, strength, and coordination. With greater flexibility, increased strength, and intricate coordination, there will be more challenges and possible variations. So a good place to start is with an adequate warm-up which will stretch the body, wake up the muscles, stimulate the breath, and activate the joints, creating a physical readiness and mental desire to perform more difficult movements.

For beginners, it is important to teach the cartwheel with a step-by-step progression of skills. It is not necessary to be able to hold a handstand before learning a cartwheel, but it is important to be able to support the body's weight briefly on the arms, and for this purpose we can teach the teeter-totter and momentary switch leg handstand. The teeter-totter is performed from a lunge position, arms raised, making a line (lever) from the hands through the body to the back foot. The front leg, with a bent knee, supports most of the body's weight and acts as a fulcrum. As the gymnast tilts forward from the waist to place the hands on the floor in front of the foot, the back foot rises in the air resembling the action of a teeter-totter (or, if you prefer, a see saw). Hands should be placed flat on the floor with head held in a slightly lifted position, just high enough to watch the hands, not too far from the foot which remains on the ground. If the hands are too far from the foot, it will be difficult to reverse the movement back to the original position with the arms raised overhead and the back foot flat on the floor. It's a good idea to practice the teeter-totter exercise in rhythm as soon as possible, two counts to tilt forward and momentarily hold the middle position with hands flat on the floor, back leg raised so the body is inverted, and two more counts to reverse the movement and return to the original lunge with arms overhead. The arms should stay in line throughout the exercise and not drop to the side.

Also, the gymnast should attempt to push the floor away with the hands when leaving the tripod position. It's also a good idea to try the teeter-totter with one leg and then the other. Most people will find it is easier to accomplish the teeter-totter on one side, but training the body on both sides for basic skills adds greatly to the overall coordination and increases the likelihood of success when attempting more difficult skills.

Once the basic teeter-totter has been more or less mastered it is time to try the switch leg handstand, although I use the term handstand loosely to mean weight supported on the arms for a brief moment. In this case, after the first half of the teeter-totter has been performed, while the weight of the body is supported on both hands and the front leg, the gymnast gives a small jump off the support leg and switches legs quickly in the air so that the leg which was in the air becomes the support leg. It is very important that the landing foot lands in the same spot where the original foot was placed on the floor, not too far from the hands. This is the main mistake of beginners on this skill and, if the landing foot is too far from the hands, it is impossible to perform the second half of the teeter-totter movement and return to an upright position, in a lunge with the arms overhead.

For most people who learn to perform this teeter-totter and the switch leg maneuver, it's a short step to a cartwheel. This basic cartwheel is a variety we'll call front-to-back cartwheel, meaning if you are facing north

at the beginning of the cartwheel, you will face south after completing the cartwheel. For beginners, the main point is to get the hand and foot placement of the cartwheel correct as well as the starting and ending position, which is a lunge with arms raised overhead.

If the right leg is in front, the gymnast places the hands down a little to the right, with fingers facing the right side, and the right hand first, followed quickly by the left. This is a quarter turn to the floor. As the gymnast switches legs, the other quarter turn takes place so the gymnast comes up facing the opposite direction from the starting position in a mirror image to the starting shape.

The legs do not necessarily have to go high overhead at the beginning, although this is not difficult for some children. Others can develop this ability after learning to perform the correct hand and foot placement and basic coordination. Remember to explain that the foot which goes up first comes down first to avoid the common mistake of hopping on the front support leg. You may be able to use mats which come with hand and foot placements corresponding to the above directions. Or you may be able to draw hands or circles with chalk for the hand placement.

Another possible technique is to have the gymnast face a folded panel mat which is perpendicular to the body and perform the basic cartwheel by placing the hands sideways on the mat and flank jumping over the mat for the desired result. Or you may have other tricks or ideas of your own which will facilitate learning the basic cartwheel. A little spotting is sometimes helpful for those who are having trouble or may fear rotating upside down.

Don't give up too quickly with one approach, but don't be afraid to try something new if you're not getting results after some effort. And sometimes you just have to go back to basic warm-up drills until the body has enough strength, flexibility, and coordination to have greater success at learning the skill. Always have patience and look for something positive to encourage, moving step by step in the right direction and having fun getting there.