

PERSONAL TRAINING · COUNTY MAYO

Michelle O'Connor's *Pull-Up* Playbook

12 weeks. Zero to one.

A step-by-step strength programme
for women who want their first pull-up.



michelleoconnorfitness.com

[@michelleoconnorfitness](https://www.instagram.com/michelleoconnorfitness)

Only 1 in 20 women can do a pull-up.

Research on upper-body strength suggests only a small fraction of adult women can complete a single strict pull-up — often cited as fewer than 1 in 20. That is not a failure of effort. Pull-ups are hard. Most programmes skip the foundations that make them possible.

To put that in perspective: the US Marine Corps once set a minimum standard of just three pull-ups for female recruits — and suspended it after more than half of the women tested could not meet it. Three. Not ten. Three.

I know how that feels. I couldn't do one either.

Twelve weeks later, I did my first full, dead-hang, chin-over-bar pull-up. Not a kip. Not a jump-assist. A real one. And I want the same for you.

WHY PULL-UPS FOR WOMEN?

- **Upper body strength that transfers to everything.** Carrying, lifting, pushing — real-life strength you'll notice daily.
- **Posture and shoulder health.** Strong lats and rhomboids pull your shoulders back where they belong.
- **Bone density.** Resistance training is one of the most powerful tools women have against osteoporosis.
- **Grip strength.** Linked to longevity, injury prevention, and better performance across every lift.
- **A foundation for more.** Muscle-ups, ring work, weighted pull-ups — it all starts here.
- **The confidence of doing something most people never will.** You'll be in a small minority. That matters.

WHAT YOU WILL BE ABLE TO DO

Once you have your first pull-up, you'll have built the pulling strength, grip endurance, and shoulder stability to progress quickly. From there: 3, 5, 10 reps. Weighted pull-ups. Assistance to others. A body that feels genuinely capable — not just aesthetically changed, but functionally strong.

Questions before you start? DM me on Instagram @michelleoconnorfitness. I'm happy to help.

WHAT YOU NEED

Equipment

This programme requires two things. That's it.

1. **A pull-up bar** — A doorframe bar works perfectly — no gym required. Make sure it's rated to hold your bodyweight plus any dynamic load. Install it securely before Session 1.
2. **A resistance band** — A set of looped resistance bands (light to heavy) is used for assisted pull-ups in the early and middle phases. Keep all bands — you'll progress to lighter assistance over time.

You'll also need a set of dumbbells (or access to a cable machine) for the lat pulldown variations.

If your goal is pull-ups, you need access to a pull-up bar. You can get a pretty decent over-the-door one for around €60 — mine is from Elverys.

BEFORE YOU START

How to use this playbook

1. **Pull-up training 2 days per week.** Each week has two sessions, at least 48 hours apart.
2. **Do the sessions in order.** Exercises are sequenced intentionally — don't skip ahead.
3. **Progress is not always linear.** Some weeks feel harder than the last. Stay with it.
4. **Warm up every session.** 5 minutes of shoulder circles, band pull-aparts, and arm swings.
5. **Track your sessions.** Use the log at the back of this playbook.
6. **Rest matters as much as training.** Sleep, protein, and recovery do as much work as the programme itself.

PULL-UP VS CHIN-UP

This playbook targets a **strict overhand pull-up** (palms facing away). Underhand chin-ups are often easier — a valid first milestone if you prefer. Stay consistent with one grip for 12 weeks.

STRENGTH AND SKILL GO TOGETHER

Yes, you're building strength — but a pull-up is also a **skill your body has to learn**. Don't wait until you feel "strong enough" to begin. Get on the bar and start the movement from day one — assisted, as a negative, whatever you can manage. Your body learns a pull-up by *doing* it, and strength and skill grow together.

Disclaimer: General fitness guidance, not medical advice. Stop if you feel sharp pain. Consult a healthcare professional before starting if you have any injury or health condition.

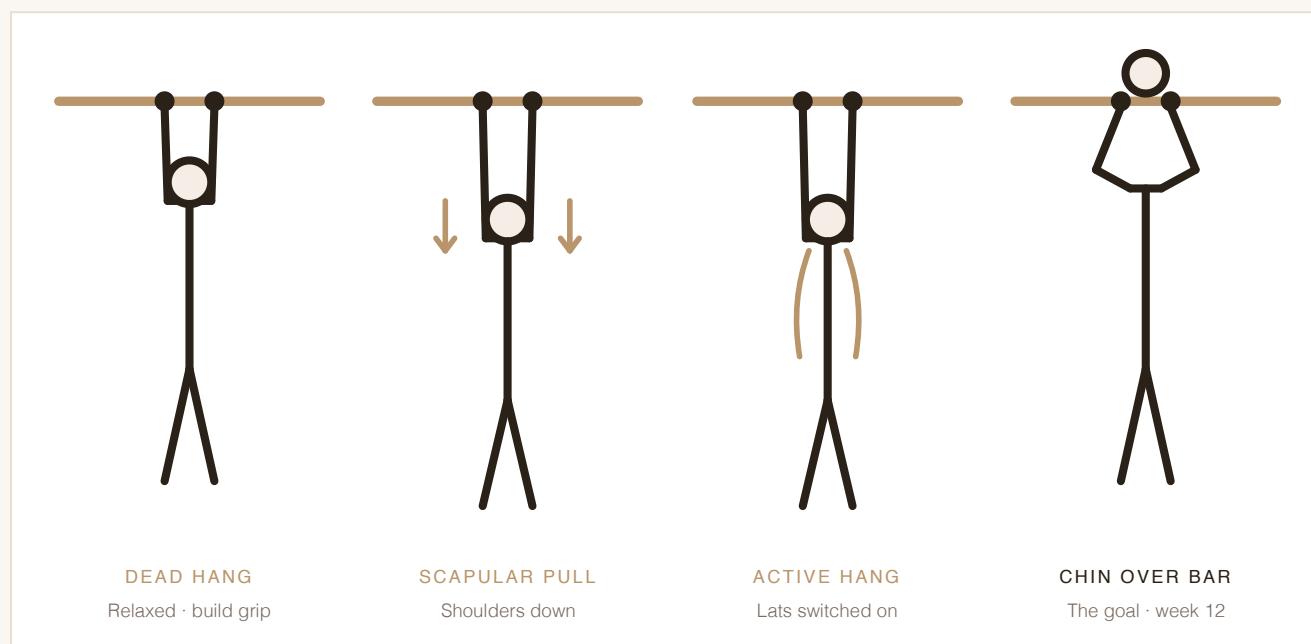
Not sure you're ready? Book a free intro call at www.michelleoconnorfitness.com

The positions, illustrated

Every session in this playbook builds from these shapes. Gold marks the cue — where the work happens.

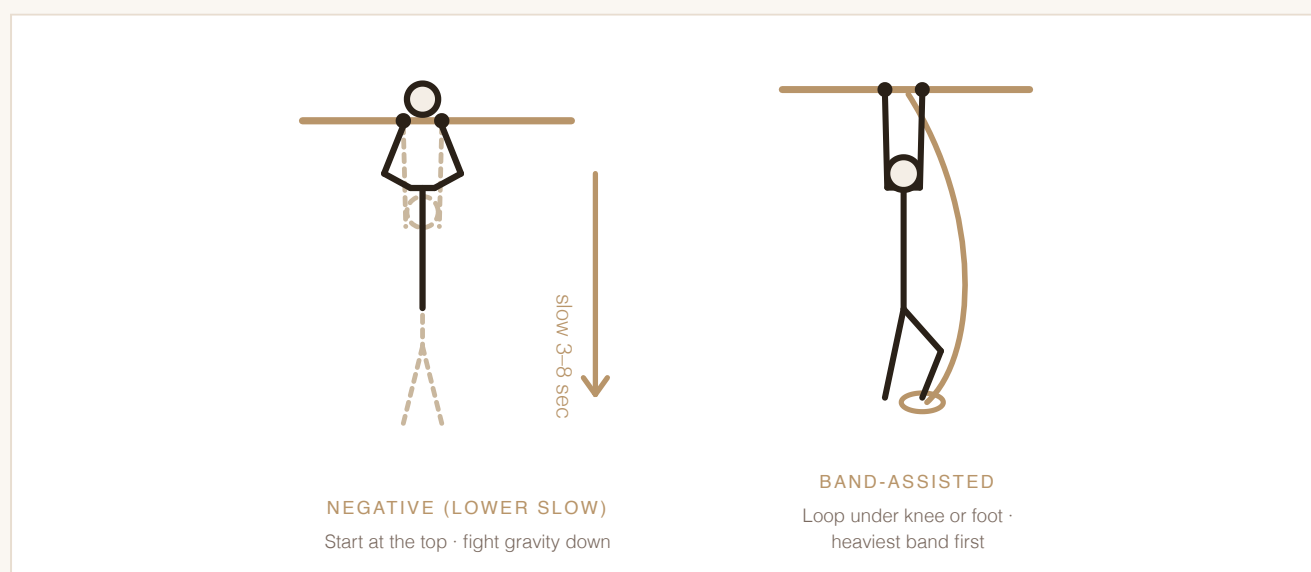
1 · The hang ladder

You'll move left to right over the 12 weeks: from a relaxed dead hang, to actively packing the shoulders down, to a full chin-over-bar pull-up.



2 · Your two most important tools

Negatives build the exact strength of a pull-up in reverse. Band assistance lets you train the full range before you can lift all of your bodyweight.



Foundation

Most people fail at pull-ups because they skip this phase. Before you can pull your bodyweight, you need to build a base: grip strength, shoulder stability, and the ability to engage your lats on command. Weeks 1–3 are about exactly that. Dead hangs, scapular pulls, and active hanging will feel deceptively simple. They are not. Done consistently, they will change the way your upper body feels within two weeks. Do not skip ahead. The programme works because of this phase.

NEED HELP?

Stuck on scapular pulls or not sure your hang is right? Send me a video on Instagram @michelleoconnorfitness — I'll tell you exactly what to fix.

Every exercise here earns its place. **Dead hangs** and **active hangs** build the grip and shoulder stability that keep you on the bar; **scapular pulls** teach your shoulder blades to start the movement — the part most people miss. **Band-assisted pull-ups** let you rehearse the full pull-up pattern with less load, while **negatives** (slow lowers) build pulling strength through the exact range you need. **Lat pulldowns** and **rows** add the back volume that makes it all possible, and the smaller shoulder work — **face pulls**, **band pull-aparts** and **Y-T-Ws** — keeps your shoulders healthy and balanced so you can train consistently. Nothing here is filler: each movement is a rung on the ladder to your first pull-up.

WEEK 1 & 2 — SESSION A — HANG & SCAPULAR WORK

Focus: getting comfortable on the bar and activating the scapulae.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Dead Hang	3	20–30 sec	60s	Shoulders packed down, breathe
Scapular Pull	3	8 reps	60s	Squeeze shoulder blades DOWN
Active Hang	3	15 sec	60s	Pull shoulder blades together
Band Pull-Apart	3	12 reps	45s	Arms straight, squeeze at end
Prone Y-T-W	3	8 each	45s	Thumbs up, slow and controlled

WEEK 1 & 2 — SESSION B — PULLING FOUNDATION

Focus: building lat engagement through supported pulling patterns.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Assisted Pull-Up (heavy band)	3	5 reps	90s	Full range — dead hang to chin over
Lat Pulldown (or band)	3	10 reps	60s	Elbows to hips, chest up
Prone Row (DB or BB)	3	10 reps	60s	Elbows close, squeeze at top
Dead Hang	2	20 sec	60s	Active shoulders — not passive
Face Pull (band)	3	12 reps	45s	Pull to forehead, elbows high

STEADY THE DEAD HANG

On the bar, don't let yourself swing. Learn to hang **dead-still** by bracing your core — ribs down, gentle tension through the middle. Controlling that swing is a strength skill in itself, and learning to brace properly here is crucial: it's the same brace that keeps you tight and efficient in every pull-up.

WEEK 3 — SESSION A — INCREASED HANG VOLUME

Extend hang time and increase scapular pull reps.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Dead Hang	4	30–40 sec	60s	Build to 40 seconds before moving on
Scapular Pull	4	10 reps	60s	Control the descent — 3 seconds down
Active Hang	3	20 sec	60s	Full tension throughout
Band Pull-Apart	3	15 reps	45s	Don't let arms drift forward
Prone Y-T-W	3	10 each	45s	Slow and deliberate

WEEK 3 — SESSION B — PULLING FOUNDATION +

Same focus as Weeks 1–2 Session B, with one extra set on main lifts.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Assisted Pull-Up (heavy band)	4	5 reps	90s	Full range — dead hang to chin over
Lat Pulldown (or band)	3	10 reps	60s	Elbows to hips, chest up
Prone Row (DB or BB)	3	10 reps	60s	Elbows close, squeeze at top
Dead Hang	3	25 sec	60s	Active shoulders — not passive
Face Pull (band)	3	12 reps	45s	Pull to forehead, elbows high

Ready for Phase 2 when you can dead hang 40 seconds, complete 10 scapular pulls, and do 5 band-assisted pull-ups with full range. Not there yet? Stay in Phase 1 — or ask for help.

Strength Loading

You can hang. You can pull your shoulder blades. Now we load the pattern. Weeks 4–6 introduce heavier pulling volume — band-assisted pull-ups with progressively lighter bands, heavier lat pulldowns, and the beginning of eccentric (negative) work that will become the backbone of Phase 3. This is where it starts to feel like training.

ASK FOR HELP

First time trying negatives? They are tricky to set up safely. DM me a video before your first session — I'll walk you through it.

Want someone coaching you through the programme? **Book a session** at www.michelleoconnorfitness.com

WEEK 4 & 5 — SESSION A — BAND-ASSISTED + ECCENTRICS

Introduce your first negatives. Jump or step to the top, lower for 3–5 seconds.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Band-Assisted Pull-Up (medium)	4	5 reps	90s	Full ROM — chin clears bar
Negative Pull-Up	3	3 reps	90s	Lower in 3–5 sec, step up to top
Dead Hang	3	30 sec	60s	After negatives this will feel harder
Lat Pulldown	3	8 reps	60s	Heavy — rate 7/10 effort
Band Pull-Apart	3	15 reps	45s	Superset after lat pulldown

WEEK 4 & 5 — SESSION B — HORIZONTAL PULLING

Rows are your best friend. Build the thickness that supports the pull-up.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Prone Row / Chest-Supported Row	4	10 reps	60s	Drive elbows back, pause 1 sec
Single-Arm DB Row	3	10 each	60s	Big range of motion
Scapular Pull	3	10 reps	60s	Still in every session
Face Pull	3	15 reps	45s	High elbows, external rotation
Assisted Pull-Up (light band)	2	4–5 reps	90s	Lighter band — earn it

WEEK 6 — SESSION A — DELOAD SLIGHTLY, REFINE

Week 6 is a slight deload in volume. Keep intensity, reduce sets by 1.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Band-Assisted Pull-Up (light/medium)	3	5 reps	90s	Test yourself with a lighter band
Negative Pull-Up	3	4 reps	2 min	4 sec descent — build eccentric time
Lat Pulldown	3	8 reps	60s	Same weight as week 5
Dead Hang	2	40 sec	60s	You should find this easier now

WEEK 6 — SESSION B — HORIZONTAL PULLING

Reduced volume deload. Quality over quantity.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Prone Row	3	10 reps	60s	Heavier than weeks 4–5 if possible
Single-Arm DB Row	3	10 each	60s	Controlled — no momentum
Face Pull	3	15 reps	45s	Don't rush these
Band Pull-Apart	3	12 reps	45s	Quality over quantity
Scapular Pull	2	10 reps	60s	Stay sharp on the basics

The Negative Phase

This is the phase that actually builds pull-up strength. Negatives (eccentric pull-ups) are the single most effective tool for getting your first pull-up. By slowly lowering yourself from the top position, you're working the exact muscles under the exact load of a real pull-up — just in reverse. The goal by the end of week 9: a controlled 5–8 second descent from chin-over-bar to dead hang. If you can do that cleanly, a full pull-up is close.

REACH OUT

This phase is hard. If your descent feels out of control or your shoulders are struggling, don't push through alone. DM me on Instagram @michelleoconnorfitness.

WEEK 7 — SESSION A — NEGATIVES FOCUS

Target: 4-second controlled descent. Step or jump to the top — don't kip.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Negative Pull-Up	4	4 reps	2 min	Slow — 4 full seconds down
Band-Assisted Pull-Up (light)	3	5 reps	90s	Use lightest band you can manage
Dead Hang	3	40 sec	60s	Grip endurance matters
Lat Pulldown	3	8 reps	60s	Heavy — 8/10 effort

WEEK 7 — SESSION B — SUPPORTING WORK

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Prone Row	4	8 reps	60s	Heavy and controlled
Face Pull	3	15 reps	45s	Shoulder health is not optional
Scapular Pull	3	10 reps	60s	Never stops being in the plan
Band Pull-Apart	3	15 reps	45s	Superset ok

WEEK 8 — SESSION A — LONGER NEGATIVES

Target: 5–6 second descent. Genuinely hard — reduce to 3 reps if form breaks.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Negative Pull-Up	4	4 reps	2 min	5–6 second descent now
Band-Assisted Pull-Up (lightest band)	3	4 reps	2 min	If form breaks, rest more
Dead Hang	3	45 sec	60s	Aim for unbroken
Lat Pulldown	3	6–8 reps	60s	Very heavy now

WEEK 8 & 9 — SESSION B — HORIZONTAL PULLING + SHOULDER HEALTH

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Chest-Supported Row	4	8 reps	60s	Back flat, squeeze hard at top
Single-Arm Row	3	10 each	60s	Full stretch at bottom
Face Pull	3	15 reps	45s	Non-negotiable for shoulder health
Band Pull-Apart	3	15 reps	45s	Light band, high volume

WEEK 9 — SESSION A — LONG NEGATIVE TEST

By the end of this session, aim for a full 8-second descent. You're nearly there.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Negative Pull-Up	4	4 reps	2 min	Full 8-second descent target
Band-Assisted Pull-Up (lightest band)	3	3–4 reps	2 min	Minimal assistance — max effort
Dead Hang	3	45 sec	60s	Unbroken if possible
Lat Pulldown	3	6–8 reps	60s	Heavy — maintain strength base

Think you're close? Send me your 8-second negative on Instagram — I'll tell you if you're ready to attempt.

Attempt Preparation

You've built the strength. Now we sharpen the movement pattern and reduce fatigue so your nervous system is fresh for Week 12. Volume drops slightly. Intensity stays. The goal is arriving at Week 12 feeling strong, recovered, and ready — not ground down.

BOOK A SESSION

Want a coach in your corner for the attempt? Book a 1:1 session or free intro call — www.michelleoconnorfitness.com

Or DM @michelleoconnorfitness with your Week 10 attempt video. I'll give you honest feedback.

WEEK 10 — SESSION A — SHARPEN THE PATTERN

Reduce band assistance to almost nothing. The attempt is two weeks away.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Negative Pull-Up	4	3 reps	2 min	Full 8-second descent, perfect form
Band-Assisted Pull-Up (thinnest band)	3	3–4 reps	2 min	Minimal assistance
Attempt — No Band	1	1 try	3 min	Attempt a full pull-up. Note how far you get.
Dead Hang	2	45 sec	60s	Rest and feel the grip
Lat Pulldown	3	6 reps	90s	Heavy — maintain strength base

WEEK 10 & 11 — SESSION B — BACK VOLUME, LOWER INTENSITY

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Prone Row	3	10 reps	60s	Moderate weight — not to failure
Face Pull	3	15 reps	45s	Shoulder prep for the attempt
Band Pull-Apart	3	15 reps	45s	High rep, low load
Scapular Pull	3	10 reps	60s	Stay sharp on the basics

WEEK 11 — SESSION A — FINAL PREP

Last hard session before attempt week. Leave something in the tank. No training 48 hours before your Week 12 attempt.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Negative Pull-Up	3	3 reps	2 min	Strong and slow — 8 seconds
Band-Assisted Pull-Up (thinnest band)	2	3 reps	2 min	Last band-assisted reps
Dead Hang	3	60 sec	60s	Grip confidence going into week 12
Lat Pulldown	2	6 reps	90s	Heavy but not maximal

Your first *pull-up.*

This is what 12 weeks of dead hangs, negatives, rows, and band-assisted work has been building toward. Here is how to give yourself the best chance.

Rest 48 hours before your attempt. Do not train the day before. Come in fresh.

Warm up fully. 10 minutes: band pull-aparts, scapular pulls, 2–3 sets of dead hangs at 20 seconds each. Get blood into the lats.

Set up properly. Overhand grip just outside shoulder width. Dead hang. Breathe in, brace, pull elbows down to hips.

Don't think — pull. The movement should feel familiar. Trust the training.

Chin over the bar = it counts. That's all. That's everything.

Film it. You will want this video — and I'd love to see it. Tag @michelleoconnorfitness

If you don't get it this week — that is okay. Repeat week 11 and attempt again. Strength doesn't always land exactly on schedule. What matters is that you kept showing up.

A note from Michelle

I made this playbook because I remember exactly what it felt like to hang from a bar and not be able to budge. I also remember the morning I did my first full pull-up and stood there for a solid 30 seconds not quite believing it.

If you're stuck at any point, struggling with a movement, or want someone to review your attempt video — reach out any time. I'm genuinely excited to help.

Website · www.michelleoconnorfitness.com

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Email · michelleoconnorfitness@gmail.com

Exercise glossary

Dead hang

Hang from the bar with arms straight. Shoulders slightly engaged (not shrugged to ears). Breathe steadily.

Scapular pull

From a dead hang, pull shoulder blades down and together without bending elbows. Lower with control.

Active hang

Hang with scapulae depressed and retracted — lats engaged, body under tension.

Negative pull-up

Step or jump to chin-over-bar, then lower as slowly as possible to dead hang. No kip.

Band-assisted pull-up

Band under foot or knee reduces load at the bottom. Full range every rep.

Band pull-apart

Hold band at chest height, arms straight. Pull band apart by squeezing shoulder blades. Control the return.

Face pull

Band or cable at face height. Pull toward forehead with elbows high and external rotation at the top.

Prone Y-T-W

Lying face down, raise arms in Y, T, and W shapes with thumbs up. Small range, high control.

Prone / chest-supported row

Row with chest supported on bench or prone on incline. Eliminates momentum; focus on squeeze at top.

Still unsure on a movement? DM me @michelleoconnorfitness with a question — no such thing as a silly one.

TRACKING

Session log

Log each session: date, session (A or B), band used, best set, and how it felt (1–10 effort).

WEEK	DATE	SESSION	BAND / NOTES	BEST SET	EFFORT
1					
1					
2					
2					
3					
3					
4					
4					
5					
5					
6					
6					
7					
7					
8					
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12			Attempt:		

Want coaching through all 12 weeks? Book a free intro call at www.michelleoconnorfitness.com

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